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"Where meaning collapses":¹ Alien and the outlawing of the female hero

The freedom of women is pre-historic,
pre-civilization The power of women ...
is pre-civilization, pre-Oedipal.

(Juliet Mitchell, 1974:366)

Abstract

*The article explores the film's apparent but problematic feminism, involving the undermining of the setting up of the main character as a heroic and liberated woman – a dissonant stance which is considered to be symptomatic of a fundamental contradiction in the positioning of woman in relation to culture and language. Kristeva's views on subjectivity and the abject are explored and applied. The silencing of the voice of the (hu)man is explored in the context of linguistic empowerment and disempowerment. A postscript on *Thelma and Louise* is added to underline and confirm the double bind in which the female hero finds herself.*

1. The relegation of the feminine

Much has been written about *Alien* in the thirteen years since its first release. A possible reason is the film's apparent but problematic feminism; in attempting to explicate it, critics have defined *Alien* as "stunningly egalitarian", "a breakthrough in cinematic sexual politics", "the *dernier cri* of the masculine principle"² – and yet it has also been considered no more than an "idyllic reconstruction of a radical feminist humanism" which in fact "reasserts a male dominance that will weaken and stabilize the female and make her safe for patriarchy" (Kavanagh, 1990:80; Byers, 1989:86). The debate tends to turn on a sequence towards the end of the film in which Ripley, the central female character, is seen undressing. The representation of her body as object of male desire seems to belie the film's apparent project of setting her up as a heroic and liberated woman. This is further

¹ Cf. Kristeva, 1982:2.

² Constance Penley, quoted by Neale, 1989:213; Byers, 1989:84; Greenberg, 1988:165.

complicated by the the source of *Alien's* horror – a womb-like alien spacecraft and an evil computer named "Mother" – being characterised as feminine. I shall contend that the film's dissonance is symptomatic of a fundamental contradiction in the positioning of women in relation to culture and language: if the symbolic is located in the patriarchal order, ruled by the law of the father, then the power of the female is found in some place outside of this order, most obviously in the presymbolic domain of the mother. It follows then that where the woman is liberated from patriarchy, she is also excluded from the use of (symbolic) language. Identification with the primitive power of the maternal leads to collusion in patriarchy's relegation of the feminine to the margins of culture, and precludes the possibility of female power within that rejected – and rejecting – order. *Alien* locates the feminine both with a monstrous threat to the symbolic and with the agent of the monster's defeat. The film attributes a double, and hence self-negating, valency to feminine power which resembles the ambivalence of the feminist search for a position in relation to the symbolic that does not also have to be a position of silence.

2. The monstrous-feminine in horror films

In her article "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection", Barbara Creed (1986:44-70) examines feminine empowerment outside the symbolic in her attempt to explain the frequent association of monstrosity with the maternal in horror films. She suggests that this association is 'imaginary' in both senses of the word: in Lacanian terms, entry into the symbolic is preceded and potentially threatened by the undifferentiation of the maternal dyad; it is here, outside the symbolic, in what Lacan calls the imaginary, that the monstrous-feminine resides. At the same time, Creed (1986:70) suggests that such a definition of female power – as negative and as prelinguistic – is an "attempt to shore up the symbolic order by constructing the feminine as an *imaginary* 'other' which must be repressed and controlled in order to protect the social order" (emphasis mine – CB). Creed, in other words, concludes that associating the mother with the monster is a patriarchal ideological project for controlling women. But in *Alien* it is the monstrous-feminine which is controlled by a woman, Ripley. I suggest that the film problematises Creed's assumption by enacting the threat of the maternal in linguistic terms: as I shall point out, what is most threatened in the film is the language of men, and the point where it is most threatened is also the point where women appear to gain the power of subjectivity and speech. But this power can only be used to re-establish the patriarchal symbolic. It is this aspect of the film I wish to explore: in *Alien*, women are given an imaginary (in both senses of the word) position from which to speak.

It is useful to follow Creed in basing my analysis on Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity and abjection.

3. Julia Kristeva: Subjectivity and abjection

According to Kristeva, the subject maintains its fragile wholeness within the symbolic order by rejecting the abject, that which both threatens and, in being excluded, defines the subject. The threat of the abject is manifested in the subject's loathing for what is vomited or excreted, for blood, for what evinces death. Kristeva (1982:2) describes the abject as the

"jettisoned object" which is "radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses". "Jettisoned objects" reveal the frailty of the subject by defining the limits of what is considered 'human' as a result of having been made to traverse these limits. In being rejected, then, the abject points both to the existence of such limits and to their ineluctable encroachment: abjection consigns waste, the evidence of death, to "the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be", while each extrication of the living remainder of the body from those borders brings it closer to the condition of the corpse, "the most sickening of wastes, ... a border that has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva, 1982:3).

At the same time, "the place where meaning collapses" does not only refer forward to death. It also connects the loss of subjectivity in death with an earlier 'place', where, preceding entry into the symbolic, the subject has not yet been formed. This place is the imaginary, or what Kristeva calls the *chora*, a fluid and yet womb-like maternal space which underlies and potentially undermines the stability of the symbolic, the paternal structure.

Alien may be seen as the mapping of an exploration of such an imaginary 'place': Kristeva (1982:18) describes the 'aesthetic task' of exploring the abject as "a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct", "retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression". In *Alien*, the space travellers' visit to the planet, and the subsequent invasion of their ship by an alien creature, mark a descent more temporal than spatial: the alien comes from a place with an atmosphere that Ash, the science officer, describes as 'primordial'.³ The terrifying 'space' of the film (its publicity slogan: "In space, no-one can hear you scream") is implicitly the abyss containing all that has been relinquished on the subject's first entry into the patriarchal symbolic.⁴

At the structural centre of the film, a meal is interrupted when one of the male diners gives birth. His body is burst open by the violent emergence of an alien creature from his thoracic cavity. The scene has been described as "one of the most horrifying ... ever filmed" (Scanlon & Gross, 1979: unpaginated). The double birth/death is graphically and convincingly depicted. But perhaps the scene's profoundly shocking effect results as much from the specific implications of its various elements as from the gory vividness of their depiction: the scene enacts the culmination of abjection, the carrying out of a profound threat to the male subject and to the symbolic order itself.

Reactions to the first studio viewing of the rough cut of the film, while contingent, are an appropriate demonstration of the scene's effect. Eating and seeing are disturbed:

One visitor choked on his beer. Another knocked over a plate of sandwiches when he lurched

³ The name of the craft is the *Nostromo*, an allusion which makes it tempting to seek other connections with Conrad's work. Kurtz's "the horror!" expresses the abjection found in *Heart of Darkness*, another place where meaning might be said to collapse. Perhaps the film reverses the metaphor in Marlow's description of the explorers in order to reveal the interchangeability of unexplored/repressed past time and distant future space: they are "wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (Conrad, 1974:95).

⁴ I would argue that the scream, and other bodily noises whose utterance and intelligibility may be said to precede the symbolic, are all that can be 'heard' in the realm of the alien.

violently in his chair. Yet another ... was seen to be peering through his fingers, which were often covering his face (Scanlon & Gross, 1979).

On an obvious level, elements of the alien's birth connect it with the human subject's rejection of the abject, of that which it finds repulsive. While eating, Kane begins to cough and retch as if choking on his food, or vomiting. A crew mate comments: "The food ain't that bad!" A scene in which a diner vomits at table would be repulsive to the spectator, for the abject would be exposed. The force of the scene, however, like the act of vomiting itself, would be conservative, a reconstitution of the body, or the subject, by the expulsion of 'bad food'.

4. The jettisoned object

The birth scene is not conservative, however: the alien emerges by bursting through the wall of the man's chest, revealing the inside of his body, physically ruptured rather than reconstituted. The new-born creature utters a cry and slithers off, leaving Kane dead on the table, surrounded by the debris of the meal. Abjection is inverted, for the expulsion of the alien makes of the human body a corpse; it is the alien and not the human which then "extricates itself, as being alive, from [the abject, the] border" of that corpse (Kristeva, 1982:3). A little later, Kane's body is disposed of by being ejected from the ship. He has become, literally, the 'jettisoned object'.

What was ostensibly the film's subject has been transformed into the embodiment of the abject. With this transformation comes the disruption of language. Not only are the body and identity of the subject ruptured, literally silencing him, but so too is the symbolic order in which that subject is constituted. The alien's birth is characterised by a number of inversions. It is non-genital, associated with the digestive tract rather than with the organs of human reproduction, and with the upper rather than the lower half of the body.⁵ Most significant, though, is the inversion of gender in the scene. The birth might be likened to 'normal' human parturition, the child's initial separation from the mother's body beginning a process which culminates in its entry into the symbolic, the moment which necessitates, particularly for the male subject, rejection of the mother and hence associates the maternal with the abject. Yet in *Alien*, a man gives birth, he is tended by male 'midwives' (Dallas and Parker), and Lambert and Ripley, the women, stand and watch.⁶ Outside the margins defined by abjection, what is human is endangered, and what is most human, according to androcentric human culture, is man.

A possible result of endangering the symbolic, though, is the disruption of its basis, the binary system that makes possible the distinction between human and non-human, or man

⁵ The alien's birth is reminiscent of the birth of Rabelais's *Gargantua*, described by Bakhtin (1968:226) as an example of the carnivalesque grotesque. The giant is conceived in his mother's womb, but is born through her ear. As in the Bakhtinian conception of the grotesque, bodily inversion signifies a "symbolic inversion," a transgression of the laws of the symbolic, the laws which construct meaning (Stallybrass & White, 1986:18).

⁶ While this may be seen simply as indicative of the helplessness of women in a moment of crisis, it does also emphasise that they are not involved in this kind of birth. Appropriately, Lambert, initially established as the stereotypical 'weak woman', is splashed with blood, marking her perhaps as the one who would, in the normal order of things, be giving birth. Ripley is almost completely absent from the scene.

and woman. The structure of *Alien*, which can be schematised in a way that reveals its symmetry and represents its descent into and return from the "limits of the symbolic", facilitates the blurring of such distinctions. The film's action, framed by sleep, can be likened to a dream, a descent into the unconscious (Kane actually refers to the *Alien*'s attack as "a horrible dream"). But there are two dreamers. The film begins with the apparent awakening of Kane. The use of double exposure as he rises – he appears to leave his own body – suggests that it is not normal waking life that he enters. At the end, it is Ripley, the woman, who goes back to sleep. The male subject does not survive the dream intact: Kane's death – the alien's birth – is the fulcrum about which the film's movement in relation to 'the abject' turns. At this point, the patriarchal symbolic is most threatened; a man is silenced by his encounter with the archaic. Kane, although established as the male subject, is characterised neither as particularly 'manly' – socially authoritative – or as 'macho' – physically powerful (Dallas and Parker, respectively, seem to conform to these stereotypes). Kane, rather, is fragile, childlike, perhaps even androgynous. For much of the film, he is almost naked, always in white. He does not bear the conventional signs of masculinity. Similarly, Ripley is not stereotypically feminine. It is as if, with the descent into the presymbolic, gender distinctions are further blurred: Kane becomes increasingly vulnerable while Ripley gets stronger. It is possible to see Kane/Ripley as the composite, and so perfectly androgynous, victim/hero of *Alien*, as a dreamer liberated from the confines of symbolic consciousness, and so – briefly – from its oppositional definitions.

Significantly, for Ripley the dream is about ascendancy; for Kane, it is a nightmare ending in death. This difference is based on the initial distinction between the masculine and feminine (waking) subjects' position in relation to the symbolic: *Alien* explores the forgotten matriarchy which precedes and underlies the structures erected to establish man's identity. The disconcerting instability of such a foundation is captured in Roger Dadoun's description of the pre-Oedipal maternal:

The mother as a spatio-temporal form is dissolved. She is no longer there, no longer present or clearly delineated. She simply marks a time *before*, a previous state which is never named; and she is that in which everything becomes engulfed ... (Dadoun, 1989:41).

The monstrous in *Alien*, as I have indicated, is maternal. On the planet, the alien hatches from an egg, implying the existence of some huge female creature, one who is never seen. The humans' ship, *Nostromo*, ('our man'), is controlled by Mother, a computer who nurtures the *Alien* at the cost of human life. These figures are manifestations of the encompassing presence and power of the presymbolic maternal. As the foundation which underlies and can undermine the construct of the symbolic, she *is* the 'place where meaning collapses'.

If, as Creed (1986:62) has stressed, this negative 'reconstruction' of the generative archaic mother – potentially the positive "woman as the source of all life" – is a result of the film's "patriarchal signifying practices", then the function of the horror film's cathartic exploration of the abject is the re-establishment of patriarchy. If, as Kristeva puts it, the "aesthetic task" is descent, then the "central ideological project of the popular horror film", Creed's analysis implies, is the return, the escape:

The horror film brings about a confrontation with the abject ... in order ... to eject the abject and re-draw the boundaries between the human and non-human ... the horror film works to separate out the

symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies (Creed, 1986:53).

The female signifies the negative, the monstrous, what the film unearths only in order to repress once more. The paradox of *Alien* is that the only crew member to survive the havoc of the maternal and finally expel the alien, ensuring the film's conservative return to the order of the father, is a woman. If the horror film functions to reaffirm the symbolic in the face of threats from all that is aligned with the (pre-signifying) universe of the mother, then what is the role of woman, as character, or as spectator/critic? Where, on the horror film's curve of descent and resurrection, does the woman find a place?

5. Reassertion of male dominance?

This is the problem which underlies the often contradictory feminist readings of the film. The scene in which Ripley undresses is, as I have pointed out, the site of much critical anxiety. Thomas B. Byers (1989:69), for instance, finds the sequence a misogynistic "reassertion of ... male domination". In Creed's view, Ripley's naked body is constructed as a "reassuring and pleasurable sign", acting to neutralise the negative signification – but also the threat – attached to the monstrous maternal (Creed, 1986:69).

While the scene does appear to reassert patriarchal dominance, it is a symptom rather than a cause of the the restitution of the symbolic order which, once more in power, returns woman to her position as object of the desiring male gaze. Creed's reading reveals the position of that gaze; when the symbolic order is restored, the female body becomes once more that which in its reification flatters the threatened phallic eye. Creed (1986:68) contends that the scene does not undermine Ripley's "role as a *successful heroine*" (my emphasis – CB). Does Creed mean that Ripley's survival in the face of the monstrous maternal makes her 'successful' in feminist terms, simply because she is a strong woman? Or is it the film's discourse, which Creed has already positioned as patriarchal, which 'succeeds'? If so, the camera's exploration of Ripley's body indeed affirms her position as the 'heroine' (the distressed and desired damsel fortunate enough to escape the monster), rather than as the agent of success, the hero.

The problem, then, lies in the film's uneasy conjunction of two forms of female power. In locating both the subversive and the conservative within the feminine, *Alien* discloses its ambivalence about woman's position in relation to the boundaries of abjection – and so to the margins of the symbolic.

James H. Kavanagh (1990:73) explains this ambivalence by suggesting that the film intentionally disguises its humanism – essentialist and politically conservative – as "powerful, progressive and justifying feminism". The horror film, to the extent that it conforms to Creed's analysis, is inevitably and explicitly humanist, its concern being the human's reassuring defeat of the non-human. I would argue that what Kavanagh calls the film's "schizophrenia" stems not from a deliberate attempt to conceal its humanism but from its unsurprising inability to position the powerful feminine on both sides of horror's traditional battle lines at once, an inability which reveals the fundamental paradox of women's relationship to patriarchal culture. In an order based on binary oppositions, she is

tor between contradictory poles: as human rather than alien, and feminine rather than masculine, she is both 'man' and not-man. To embrace fully the power bestowed by one position is to relinquish that of the other. *Alien's* double empowerment of the feminine resembles what Margaret Homans, in a different context – one I shall return to – calls a "self-cancelling project" (1986:36).

A close analysis of *Alien's* representation of language, of the symbolic and what both underlies and threatens it, reveals the film's entrapment in this paradox. The tripartite structure of my analysis follows the pattern of the film's exploration of the abject: I first examine its regression to the realm of the maternal, then its positioning of the feminine within this realm, and end with the film's conventional but problematic restoration of the symbolic, an ending which reveals *Alien's* failure to find a conclusion which can reassert the human without undermining the feminine. As I shall demonstrate, the film can compensate for the abjection of Kane's body only by making an object of Ripley's. In doing so, the film conservatively bears – and at the same time, unwittingly, radically bares – the project of patriarchal culture: silencing the female.

6. Speechless with horror: silencing the (hu)man

I heard--him--it--this voice--other voices--all of them were so little more than voices-- ... impalpable, like the dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 1974:115).

Alien's disruption of the symbolic is made explicit in its representation of language and specifically of the mouth, the site of speech. The descent to the presymbolic is associated with a shift in the function of the mouth; it is as if the film presents a regression to what Freud called the "oral phase" of sexual development, the earliest period, in which the mouth is the locus of nutrition and eroticism. Laplanche and Pontalis (1973:287) describe the oral phase:

The first stage of libidinal development: sexual pleasure at this period is bound predominantly to that excitation of the oral cavity and lips which accompanies feeding ... the love-relationship to the mother ... is marked by the meanings of *eating* and *being eaten*.

Fittingly, then, the birth scene takes place at the dinner table. The crew is being fed by Mother, who appears to provide everything. (They have no control over what is fed to them; as Ripley is to discover, this extends from distasteful food to lethally dangerous misinformation.) Dialogue during the scene is not easily intelligible. More than one person speaks at the same time, and the noise of eating and the hum of machinery – the sounds of the bodies of Mother and 'children' feeding and being fed – seem to drown out speech. The conversation, when it can be made out, is about food – predominantly complaints about the nutrition provided by Mother. One exchange makes explicit the location of (specifically male) sexuality with the oral: Lambert, the second female crew member, comments on the speed at which Parker eats, despite his distaste. He retorts that he'd "rather be eating something else". It is clear from her coy response that cunnilingus is implied.

The sounds made by Kane as the creature emerges, the 'voice' of the body, seem to be more clearly articulated than verbal language. Gagging, Kane is effectively gagged. A

spoon is put in his mouth, not to feed him, but wedged in to stop him from biting his tongue. It is too late; his tongue has become redundant, as, at this point, have all human 'tongues'. The newborn alien utters a cry, just conceivably a distorted version of 'mama' – in this place, the alien speaks – and then vanishes. The scene ends with a long silence; in the face of the horror, human language fails completely.

The shift in the oral function which culminates in this silence is introduced with Kane's impregnation, the first 'oral rape' of the film. Kane alone explores the deepest recess of the alien craft, a damp organic chamber filled with eggs. A creature hatches from one and attacks him, covering his face and penetrating his mouth with a phallic organ, which later proves to have inseminated him. As explorer, looking into the depths of the maternal, Kane is made the object of sexual penetration, is blinded and silenced.⁷ The narrative falters with the loss of its central subject: as soon as Kane's face is covered, there is a cut to a long exterior shot of the alien ship on the desolate planet, a shot with no human reference point. The rescue of Kane is not recorded. The interior of the ship cannot be seen once he is unconscious.

This disturbance of the visual is another symptom of the alien's threat. The subject's entry into the symbolic order is marked by seeing, by the distinguishing power of the gaze. The reconnaissance of the alien planet is hindered by the failure of both visual and verbal communication. The crew on the ship and the three who enter the alien craft keep in contact by means of video cameras and microphones. Shots of the planet from the logically non-human angle of an omniscient narrating camera – the view of a landscape devoid of humans – are accompanied by organic noise, breathing, a heartbeat. Prior to the symbolic is the vocalisation of the maternal body. Here, the human point of view is obscured and disrupted: the camera (both fictional and actual) fails, and so does the speech needed to explain it. Dallas, the ship's commander, the man expected to stand for control, reason, order, has his voice obscured by interference. He tries to communicate with the science officer, saying: "Ash, as you can see, there ..."; the rest is unintelligible. Ash cannot see, and neither he nor we can hear what it is that he cannot see.

The birth scene completes this disruption of the subject 'eye' when revulsion at the sight of the creature bursting through Kane's body makes some spectators look away, cover their faces, close their eyes. As Creed (1986:64) puts it, the "suturing processes" which position the viewer of a horror film as seeing subject can be "momentarily undone while the horrific image on the screen challenges the viewer to run the risk of continuing to look".

After Kane's death, there seems to be a hiatus in the film, an interval before the narrative is re-established. This is more than just a period of recovery after the climactic birth scene, I would contend. At the nadir of the descent, subjectivity is fragmented among the surviving crew members, leading to a loss of audience sympathy and a fault, a weak spot, in the narrative structure. *Alien's* capacity to threaten the symbolic extends, then, to the narrative that frames it, and even to the signifying practices of its medium.⁸

⁷ After his apparent recovery, while the alien is gestating, Kane is asked about the rape. All he remembers is "a horrible dream about smothering". That the "smothering", that which has filled his mouth and covered his eyes, should bear within it the word *mother*, is appropriate.

⁸ The alien is indirectly presented as a threat to writing, too. Attempts to remove it are hindered by the fact that it has acid for blood. When some is spilt, Dallas examines it by probing it with a pen. The acid corrodes the tip of the pen, making it useless.

The second half of the film narrates the crew's attempts to hunt out and destroy the alien, which is concealed somewhere on the ship, and the deaths of the crew members as they fail. The exploded subject is gradually narrowed down once more and reconstituted, as Ripley.⁹

7. The 'bitch' speaks: placing the female voice

[W]omen's place in language, from the perspective of an androcentric ... tradition, ... is with the literal, the silent object of representation, the dead mother ... (Homans, 1986:32).

The symbolic language which is traditionally the domain and possession of men is threatened with dissolution. At its expense, the alien, creature of the maternal, has been born. If, as Margaret Homans (1986) puts it, patriarchy positions woman with the "silent object ... , the dead mother", then the resurgence of the maternal has its corollary in the linguistic ascendance of the women.

Lambert is presented as brittle and hysterical, a stereotypical 'weak woman' contrasted with the strength and rationality of Ripley. She is the first to speak in the film, and, characteristically, she complains: "I am cold." Her words are ignored. She is the last to die, and her screams, heard by Ripley, seem to sum up the film's reduction of human language to the primitive: they are utterly bestial. To this extent, like Dallas, Brett and Parker, Lambert is a human stereotype, defined by the symbolic and destroyed by what threatens it. Yet, on the planet, rebuked by Dallas, the commander, for complaining, she defends her language, retorting, "I *like* whining."

This assertion reveals one aspect of female power: the positive re-evaluation of what patriarchy considers negative, what is seen as the weakly feminine use of speech. Ripley's linguistic power is the kind more commonly accepted as feminist: her speech reveals a confident rationality usually associated with the masculine. Significantly, this, like Lambert's whining, leads to objections from the male crew members. The woman who commands symbolic power is abnormal, and conceived as a threat to the masculine subject. To this extent, Ripley is positioned as opposed to the 'men', who try to revert her language to Lambert's controllable inarticulacy. An early scene in the film suggests that this may, superficially at least, be quite easily done. During the descent to the planet, Ripley is stopped by Parker and Brett, who are repairing damage to the ship. A valve emits a noisy

⁹ The order of the deaths is telling: the first victim after Kane is Dallas, the commander of the ship, conventional site of human authority. Like Kane's, his death is explicitly related to the loss of a seeing subject. He is carrying a video camera, monitored by the others; when the creature attacks him, the screen goes blank. Quite what happened is never established. Next to die is Brett, one of the two technicians. His relationship to the symbolic is problematized by his use of language, for he is excessively laconic: virtually all he ever says is "Right". Parker, the black technician, is physically strong and potentially violent, the most enthusiastic but least rational about killing the alien. The last is Lambert, who has been constructed as the weak, inarticulate woman. It is as if the alien first kills those who are most 'human', in terms of their centrality to patriarchal discourse.

blast of steam, obscuring dialogue. The men ask Ripley about getting paid overtime. Ripley knows – and so is implicitly empowered in – the law of the company that pays them. She says: "You're guaranteed by law to get a share." Parker expresses his resentment by pretending not to hear or understand her. He keeps repeating "What?" and laughing. When she leaves, he turns off the valve, the sudden quiet revealing that he has deliberately disrupted – or at least refused to facilitate – their communication. He laughs and calls her "Some bitch!"

Calling Ripley a "bitch" plays an important part in establishing her position in the alignments of human and non-human. Kavanagh (1990:77) points out that Ripley's naming of the alien and the computer reveals the connection between the two non-humans: she calls the creature a "son of a bitch", and when the computer refuses to obey her, she shouts "Mother, you bitch!" This also seems to indicate her opposition to both: replacing Kane and guiding the film's return from the depths of the presymbolic, she needs to connect the alien and the computer which protects it with the archaic maternal, defining her 'enemy', perhaps. Except – and Kavanagh does not mention this – Ripley is also called a "bitch". She cannot be extricated from her identity with the mother.

That her power is coupled with that of the maternal, at the same time as opposing it, is evident in Ripley's first strong assertion of linguistic power: it coincides with Kane's silencing. Because Kane and Dallas are exploring the planet, Ripley, as third officer, takes control of the *Nostromo*. The absence of the men leaves her in command. Kane is brought back with the creature attached to his face and Ripley has to decide whether or not to allow him on board. She is ruthless, refusing to break quarantine rules and permit entry to what is unknown. She insists on trying to capture the alien in rational – symbolic – language, saying: "I need a clear definition". Kavanagh (1990:79) suggests that Ripley seems inhuman at this point, "making a decision on scientific, theoretically antihumanist grounds". This positioning is significant in that Ripley, as 'bitch', is aligned with the non-human. Paradoxically, though, her assertiveness is humanist in intention: to exclude not Kane, but the alien. Her growing command of the symbolic is dependent on its threatened condition; nonetheless, her power is used to defend it against the non-human. But Ripley is, for now, refused her 'definition'. Ash opens the airlock without her permission, letting Kane and the alien on board. The computer Mother, synthetic manifestation of the maternal, has to ensure that the offspring of the alien mother gains entry, and uses her 'son', Ash, a robot and the ship's science officer, to do so. Like the alien, Ash is called a "son of a bitch" (by Parker, on discovering that he is a robot and so not human). The relationship between the synthetic non-humans and language is a complex one: logically, the representatives of science might be expected to be directly opposed to the organic non-human's disruption of language. Products of human reason, they seem at the furthest remove from the presymbolic. The film, though, presents the language of science as opposed to that of the human symbolic. When Ripley confronts Ash about his disobedience, he deliberately uses scientific jargon to avoid answering her questions. Further, Mother's betrayal of the crew is dependent both on the concealment of her orders in a binary code which only Ash can understand, and on the illusion that the computer is more human than synthetic, that it is benevolent and maternal. Early in the film, Dallas, the commander, tries to find out why the craft has been re-routed. He types a message into the computer: "What's the story, Mother?" The irony is revealed later: Mother's 'story' is a lie, and her human 'children' are expendable. The alien, as organic creature and as Ash

the robot, is her true child. Later, when Dallas asks Mother to help him destroy the alien, she refuses, repeating only: "Does not compute."

Ripley decodes Mother's language, making it intelligible to the human. In doing so, she discovers that the human has been betrayed, that mother and monster are connected. The woman is empowered in the realm of the maternal, but uses that power to defend 'man'. Determined to destroy the alien, Ripley programmes the computer to blow up the ship. At this point, Mother begins to speak, in a human, female voice. All she can utter in human speech, though, is the countdown to her own destruction. When Ripley changes her mind and tries to reverse her order, Mother ignores her completely. Ripley attacks the computer, shouting: "Mother, you bitch!". She manages to escape before the explosion in a space capsule, ejecting herself from Mother's craft. In an enactment of the Oedipal crisis, she breaks away from the maternal. The body of the spaceship explodes as Ripley leaves it. The alien's rupturing of Kane's body is echoed in Ripley's 'birth' from Mother. The maternal is fragmented, dissolved in space, abjected.

Ripley restores order by destroying the malevolently inhuman mother. When she finds that the alien has in fact stowed away on her escape craft, she dispatches him reasonably easily. The hero of the film, she has succeeded – where all men failed – in carrying out the 'ideological project' of the horror film: she has ensured the return from the abject, the reconstitution of the symbolic, of meaning. In shouting "you bitch" at Mother, she may be said to have brought about what Creed (1988:65) calls "the conventional ending of the horror narrative in which the monster is usually 'named' and destroyed", in which the abject is once more repressed.

8. The word of her own silencing: Restoring the symbolic

But because such a project is ultimately self-cancelling – what she is bearing here is the word of her own silencing – what appears ... is not so much a compromise as a tension between two contradictory aims ... (Homans, 1986:36)

In the above quotation Margaret Homans is writing about Elizabeth Gaskell's struggle to position herself in relation to her writing of a commentary on Wordsworth's poems. The "contradictory aims" are to write, and yet to perceive herself as at one with nature, which is the object of his writing. Ripley's role as champion of the symbolic order at the end of *Alien* is a similarly self-cancelling project: she is silenced in the same way as the maternal body is. She is the agent of the destruction of her own power; in ensuring the ascent from the abject, she commits herself to going back to sleep, her dream of power ended. Giving birth, Kane bears the alien. In rescuing language from the place where meaning collapses, Ripley bears the human, which seems inescapably to be the "word of her own silencing".

Kristeva (1982:3) uses the image of giving birth in her description of the role of abjection in the constitution of the subject:

I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself* ... "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit (emphases in original).

Kristeva, like Ripley, and like the female spectator of the film, is a daughter. Kristeva does not make explicit the differences between the 'becoming' of the subject 'I' of the daughter and that of the son. Because first person pronouns are not gendered, their reference when she uses them is ambiguous. But can Kristeva, as a woman as well as a writer, be the subject of her own discourse? Is the 'I' giving birth the subject constructing itself by expelling the abject? Or is this *I* – not 'I' – the mother, violated – abjected – by the escape of the new 'I'? And the newborn 'myself' – not *myself*: is this the newly constituted subject, or that which is vomited, expelled with revulsion?

A man, securely constituted within the laws of the patriarchal symbolic, escapes this ambiguity. He cannot give birth. His expulsion of the abject unambiguously reaffirms the speaking 'I'. But in *Alien*, a man is made to give birth, becoming what is abject. The constitution of the symbolic 'I' is fundamentally threatened, and Kristeva's metaphors become literal in the imaginary realm of the mother. Kane enacts "the process of becoming another at the expense of [his] own death": the man gives way both to the alien, the 'son of a bitch' born out of his body, and to the woman, whose power is connected with the dissolution of his own. Ripley's power, however, ensures the restoration of the ruptured symbolic – and male – body. To this end, the pattern of forced oral insemination and subsequent birth is repeated in the second half of the film, with significant variations. This time, Ripley is the victim.

The second oral rape takes place when Ripley, having decoded Mother's messages, is attacked by Ash. She has become the enemy of the maternal, and he avenges Mother and the alien by forcing her to confront the implications of defending the symbolic. In a scene which both encapsulates and complicates the film's regressive disorientation of the oral function, Ash rolls up a magazine and penetrates Ripley's mouth with it. It is a pinup magazine. A shot of Ripley's head, pushed back on the counter surface, juxtaposes her, choking on the paper which fills her mouth, with the cover girl on a magazine propped up behind her: the woman is scantily dressed and in a sexually suggestive pose. Apart from that, she resembles Ripley.

Where Kane was penetrated with the flesh of the alien, Ripley is raped with the material of human language, material associated explicitly with the construction of women as sexual objects. By forcing on Ripley the consequences of defending the symbolic, Ash predicts the end of the film: she will be undressed, gazed upon and silenced. In the realm of the maternal, the male gives birth: the gendered body is cut loose from its symbolic signification. As language is forced back into Ripley's mouth, the literal and the figurative phalluses of patriarchy again become one.

Ripley finally receives the 'clear definition' she has demanded. Ash describes the alien – and so himself – as

the perfect organism. [It's] a survivor, unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality ... I can't lie to you about your chances ...

The definition places Ripley on the side of morality, of the symbolic order which, in order to retain her humanity, she has to fight to restore. Her move away from the powerful yet inhuman role of 'bitch' begins here. Kavanagh (1990:79) points out that, after her seemingly remorseless rationality earlier in the film, she now becomes excessively

human(e), even endangering the rest of the crew by going back to rescue her cat. The shift from non-human to human may also be seen as a return to conventionally feminine forms of behaviour, as her almost sentimental concern for her pet suggests.

9. The (re-inscribing?) striptease

This shift culminates in the film's last sequences, in which Ripley, having separated herself from the non-human maternal, prepares to go back to bed. The controversial scene in which she undresses is made to resemble a striptease: each garment she removes seems to be the last, only to present a more revealing one beneath it. Byers's (1989:86-87) analysis of the sequence makes a significant point: not only does the apparent voyeurism of the scene "re-establish [Ripley] as the other", it also "put[s] back in her traditional (non)place the female spectator who may mistakenly have begun to think that she could be the subject of the viewing experience". Identification with Ripley as female hero may be a liberatory experience for the female spectator, but when Ripley is reinscribed within the symbolic, returned to her role as object of the desiring look, the female viewer is confounded, dislocated. Kane's death resulted in the horrified refusal to look (particularly, perhaps, on the part of male viewers); now Ripley's nudity refuses the female spectator a point of view. By implication, she, like Ripley, is returned to the role of object, the silenced position both symbolised and enforced by Ash's pinup magazine.

This conservative shift in Ripley's role has important implications for the alien, too. It is concealed on the capsule with her, and its appearance almost immediately after the 'strip tease' suggests that it has been watching her. Sharing the phallogocentric gaze of the camera, the alien may be said to become a 'man', this contrasting with its construction as apparently androgynous within the realm of the maternal, the long but hollow 'tongue' it uses for killing its victims resembling both male and female genitalia. Now, as it watches Ripley (at this point, as she climbs into a spacesuit, the camera angle is from below, revealing her crotch), the 'tongue' is extended slowly. The movement, not seen before, and not associated with immediate violent contact, strongly suggests male desire. The effect of this gendered response is also to make the creature less alien. In becoming 'man', it becomes human, now positioned, like Ripley, within the binary oppositions of the symbolic. At the end of the film the creature is no longer alien, no longer appallingly amorphous, half-seen and constantly mutating, but visible, and disappointingly humanoid. At the moment he is ejected from the craft, he is nothing but a man in a monster suit. The maternal has been abjected and the non-human has been domesticated. The final threat to Ripley of both Ash and the alien creature, both 'sons of bitches', is that posed to woman by man rather than to human by non-human. In 'defeating' Ash and the alien, Ripley makes them men and herself their female victim.

Ripley ejects the creature from the ship. It is not seen to be destroyed, though. The abject is reinstated as that which is outside the symbolic order and continues to challenge it. Ripley's escape from the exploding ship and her expulsion of the creature are the two 'births' which follow her oral rape as the alien's birth followed Kane's. The first, like conventional birth, restores the role of abjection to the feminine maternal; the second seems to carry out the conservative act of vomiting, of reconstituting the borders of the subject.

Ripley's return to a feminine position within the symbolic is evinced by changes in her use of language. Her final attack on the creature is not characterised by her earlier rational speech. Her mumbling gradually gives way to the childlike and incantatory repetition of one word: "Lucky, lucky, lucky ..." By implication, her escape is fortuitous, not of her own agency. At the moment of blasting the creature out of the capsule, and so of closing off once more the borders of the symbolic, her language collapses altogether into a scream.

Ripley records her last message, a log report in which she returns to her original rank "third officer" and hopes "with a little luck" to be rescued. Having "signed off", she lowers her eyes, picks up her cat – that other domesticated alien – and goes back to sleep. The last shot of Ripley, reclining in the transparent sleeping compartment, dressed in white, hands folded (and, it appears, wearing lipstick for the first time in the film), strongly resembles Disney's *Snow White* in her glass coffin. She is sleeping because the wicked witch's plan to kill her has failed. She will be wakened by the kiss of the handsome prince and will go off to be his wife. Like the fairytale heroine, Ripley sleeps. Her dream of power, which she will remember as a nightmare – as Kane's nightmare – is ended, and she waits to be wakened into the human world.

Juliet Mitchell presents one of the conclusions of both Freud's and Engels's accounts of the origins of human society: the freedom of women precedes history, civilization, humanity. This implies that the female is potentially powerful and threatening to patriarchal culture. What it in fact means is what *Alien* demonstrates: like the maternal, the oral, the abject, the freedom of women is what is superseded, replaced, and excluded by the formation of what is human. What the analysts of the origins of culture agree on, according to Mitchell (1974:336), is that

in the individual, ... 'the world historical defeat' of the female takes place with the girl's ... entry into the resolution of her Oedipus complex – her acceptance of her inferior, feminine place in patriarchal society.

For the female reader/spectator, this means that only when man is rendered speechless in an imaginary reversal of the origins of culture, can woman find a temporary and abnormal place to assert her voice. The feminist theorist must try to find an alternative reading of culture to that which the male analysts and, following them, this film and the many others like it, provide.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection can be used to explain the horrifying elements of an alien's birth from a man's body, but it is where her framework becomes fragile and her theory unclear – where the meanings of 'I' and 'myself' become ambiguous – that Kristeva's writing unwittingly, it seems, reveals the horror of the film's happy ending. In the domain of the presymbolic maternal, a woman may gain access to a power usually denied her. Here, in the imaginary world of the horror film, she seems to find a voice that is heroic. But when she has succeeded in restoring the order of the 'real' world, she can – must – wash off the blood and be quiet. The final paradox is that only when she is cleaned and quietened can she speak or write in a language considered human and intelligible.

10. Postscript

The ending of Ridley Scott's latest film, *Thelma and Louise*, seems to make explicit the problem first raised in *Alien*: what does one do with a female hero once she has discovered that her heroism is at odds with the social order that dictates happy endings? The monster killed by Thelma and Louise is a rapist, the rest of the film traces their exhilarating empowerment as outlaws, and the final freeze-frame confirms that, as in the case of Ripley, no satisfactory resolution is available. In midair above the Grand Canyon they, like Ripley, must be suspended in space, only transcending the double bind of the female hero with the help of a cinematic device. Their liberation remains imaginary.

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