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If the Exosuit Fits

Becoming the Alien Queen in *Alien* and *Aliens*

Historically, Ridley Scott's Alien (1979) and James Cameron's Aliens (1986) have attracted an exorbitant amount of scholarship focusing on the numerous representations of the maternal body scattered throughout the pair of films. However, the majority of criticism tends to restrict the narrative in each film by structuring it as a binary opposition between Ellen Ripley and the Alien Queen, each seemingly embodying the role of "good" and "bad" mother respectively. In this article, I argue that the relationship between these two maternal figures is not so easily reduced to the strict dichotomy between "good" and monstrous body; in fact, it is one of subjection. The following article incorporates Barbara Creed's scholarship on Scott's Alien to illustrate that the first film in the franchise pays close attention not only to the primordial archaic mother of the pre-Symbolic, but to how the traumatic experience of birth is internalized in the psychic realm. Furthermore, this article explores how this very experience of abjection facilitates a "turning toward" phallic Law in order to assuage the trauma of the originary loss. Using Judith Butler's theory of homosexual melancholy, I argue that the Alien Queen in Cameron's Aliens is not merely a horrifying phallic mother but an Absolute Subject of maternity that Ripley must embody to be recognized within the phallogocentric network of representation.

You still don't understand what you're dealing with, do you? Perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility.

—Ash, *Alien*

"Get away from her, you bitch," Ellen Ripley screams from within the cyborgesque, cargo-loading exosuit as the Alien Queen lurches toward Ripley's adopted daughter, Newt. The iconic line from James Cameron's science-fiction

horror film, *Aliens*, has resonated with audience members for nearly thirty years because it exemplifies a classic battle between two seemingly incompatible maternal bodies: one is a tough yet attractive mother protecting a helpless orphan, and the other is a lumbering monstrosity bent on the destruction of mankind. Simply put, Ripley's drubbing of the Alien Queen through an airlock is viewed as the destruction of the "bad" mother. As Lynda K. Bundtzen illustrates, the Alien Queen, with her "multiple tentacles and oozing jaws" is "the phallic mother of nightmare" (104), whereas Ripley's beautiful and feminine physique is emphasized, not only to contrast her physique with the Queen's but because the suit itself is clear. The transparency of the cargo-loading exosuit is crucial. It is important not because it showcases the dichotomy between the apparent "good" and "bad" mother—where the Alien Queen "arouses primal anxieties about woman's sexual organs" (Bundtzen 104)—but because it is an example of Ripley performing a masquerade of maternity and acquiring a phallic extension, which allows her to be recognized as a maternal body within the phallogocentric economy.

In this article, I argue that the Alien Queen serves as an imaginary and deeply specular matrix of identity that Ellen Ripley is required to embody in order to be recognized within the phallogocentric network. The varied representations of maternity in the Alien franchise have been explored, most notably by Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* in which she associates the alien lifeform in Ridley Scott's *Alien* with the primordial archaic mother. Furthermore, the Alien Queen, who features prominently in Cameron's sequel, has achieved similar notoriety as the embodiment of monstrous maternity. In his article "A Child Is Being Eaten," Terrence Holt identifies this prevailing sentiment, arguing that the surplus of overt feminine sexuality attributed to the Alien Queen—complete with "spiky foreparts, modeled apparently after a praying mantis" (224)—links her to the phantasmatic phallic mother. The Alien Queen is typically featured as a body characterized by extravagant wholeness; she is both phallic, as indicated by her "spiky foreparts," and excessively feminine, given her reproductive capabilities.

Less attention, however, has been directed at the relationship between these two embodiments of the maternal body and, more importantly, their role in shaping the subjective makeup of the protagonist, Ellen Ripley. Working with Creed's theory of the archaic mother, as well as Judith Butler's conception of homosexual melancholy and its role in subjection, I want to reevaluate the relationship between not only the archaic and phallic mother, but Ripley and the Alien Queen. If, as Creed has argued, the alien lifeform featured in Ridley Scott's initial film serves as a version of the archaic mother, how does Ripley's traumatic encounter with this entity condition her for future subjection to phallic Law? Both *Alien* and *Aliens*, I suggest, explore how the primordial and

prelinguistic site of the maternal body, which is seemingly beyond phallogocentric exploitation, becomes, in fact, the very locus of maternal subjection.

Abject Maternity

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva outlines her theory of the abject and the relationship between the imaginary object and the primordial milieu of the maternal body. Kristeva argues that the abject is the “jettisoned object,” which is necessarily expelled from either the body or the psyche to allow for symbolic identity (1-2). As that which the self must extricate itself from, the maternal body serves as the originary abject object, and all subsequent experiences of abjection resonate with the spectre of the trauma of birth. Separation from the maternal body, which is necessary for the child to achieve clearly delineated subjectivity, is a “violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of power as securing as it is stifling” (Kristeva 13). Therefore, these experiences of abjection are grounded in the primordial archaic mother—the phantasmatic construct prior to castration that serves as the very threat of symbolic collapse through her association with the semiotic and unsymbolizable “outside,” which marks the borders stabilizing symbolic identities.

Ridley Scott’s *Alien* not only showcases a vivid representation of this primordial figure but, more importantly, depicts the characters’ attempt to extricate themselves from the threat to subjective autonomy that it presents. The film opens with a tracking shot that moves from the vacuum of space to the interior of the Weyland-Yutani vessel, *Nostramo*, exposing tubular pathways that give the impression of pulsating organic material. The camera comes to rest on the stark and white sleep capsules, which house the crew in a state of hypersleep. The audience watches as Kane awakens first, followed by the rest of the crewmembers, as they are birthed by the ship, which is referred to as “mother.” This preoccupation with birth is consistent throughout the narrative. It culminates in the infamous scene in which the alien lifeform explodes from Kane’s chest and the climatic conclusion in which Ripley literally expels the alien lifeform from the escape pod and turns on the engines to incinerate the creature as it dangles from the vessel by the line of grappling hook resembling an umbilical cord.

Barbara Creed alludes to how *Alien* focuses predominantly on the “reworking of the primal scene in relation to the representation of other forms of copulation and procreation” and argues that “behind each of these lurks the figure of the archaic mother, that is, the image of the mother in her generative function—the mother as the origin of all life” (123). Furthermore, Catherine Constable notes that the opening sequence illustrates one of the primary birthing scenes in the

film and is contrasted with those that take place on the alien craft where the “topography of the ship suggests a female body, its outstretched legs positioned either side of a vaginal entrance” (175). More specifically, the plethora of feminine imagery shows that the film is concerned primarily with representations of the pre-Oedipal archaic mother, who “represents a terrifying fantasy of sexual difference” in her exorbitant femininity (Sempruch 66). The aforementioned scenes of the crew waking up from hypersleep and exploring the alien ship all take place in relative silence, emphasizing the correlation with the phantasmatic entity that serves as the “maternal figure of the pre-Oedipal semiotic” (66).

These allusions to birth and the pre-Oedipal mother of fantasy are coupled with the abject threat of subjective reabsorption back into the womb. The most explicit example occurs when Kane becomes the unwitting host of an alien being as the creature’s phallic extension penetrates his throat, simultaneously keeping him in a comatose state and facilitating his breathing. The aptly named “face sucker” destroys any semblance of singularity that Kane possesses by fully covering his face and rendering him symbolically anonymous. The theme of absorption reoccurs throughout the film as the alien predominantly chooses to harvest the bodies to produce more offspring. Even when crewmembers are killed, this customarily takes place off screen, with their bodies disappearing into the air ducts.

These traumatic encounters in the primal scene constitute a primordial experience with abjection that conditions the individual, namely Ellen Ripley, for future subjection to the phallic Law. Prior to separating from the mother, the infant is a subject-in-process, and subject-object relations are nonexistent because the differentiating process has not yet taken place. The maternal body, as Kristeva has intimated, is the original “lost object,” and by way of separating from the maternal body the child is able to differentiate and recognize other objects (Beardsworth 131). In this way, the experience of gestation, and the wholeness of the primordial maternal body, is preserved psychically as the lost object and the object that grounds all object relations from then onward. The abject trauma of birth is internalized as an object of the ego, and it is the very fantasy object that the Law targets to subject the maternal body.

Aliens

James Cameron’s *Aliens* illustrates the way that the psychic imprint of the archaic mother is mobilized into a patriarchal projection of “ideal” maternity to legitimize the subjection of a female body coded as lacking. Although the film revolves around an alien attack on the terraforming colony on LV-426 and the colonial marines dispatched to combat it, the underlying narrative focuses on the redemption of Ellen Ripley. She awakens from hypersleep fifty-seven

years after the events of the previous film, the sole survivor from *Nostramo*, and is accused by the Weyland-Yutani Corporation of criminal negligence in the destruction of the ship. When the corporation is unable to coerce Ripley into a confession and refuses to acknowledge the existence of the alien lifeform, it decides to remove her pilot's license. The license is an arbitrary object, embodying value only in its connection to the events on *Nostramo* and corresponds with the originary experience of abjection indicative of the maternal body. The result of the removal is, therefore, essentially a prohibition on the return to the primordial wholeness of the womb by the phallic Law. As with the maternal body following birth, Ripley's traumatic encounter with the alien is internalized in the psyche; the imaginary object becomes inseparable from the self (Moruzzi 144-145). This process is indicated in the instances in which she awakes with nightmares that relive the experience; the resurfaced abject object that is fundamental to her subjective makeup continues to haunt her. The pilot's license, therefore, signifies nothing intrinsic but, nevertheless, serves as Lacan's *objet petit a*, a "conceptual placeholder for the object that, in psychical terms, is inaccessible" (Pettigrew 257). The denial of the alien coupled with Ripley's guilt regarding the death of her crew gives imaginary resonance to the *objet petit a*, creates the "fantasy of symbiotic completion," and, more importantly, "figures as the proper object of Symbolic recognition" (Rosen-Carole 91-92). Having removed the license and forced Ripley into the role of menial cargo-loader, the Weyland-Yutani Corporation then offers to return the license if Ripley escorts the colonial marines to LV-426 to investigate the possible alien attack. Although its existence was initially completely denied and prohibited, the alien race now serves as that very thing that the Law posits as promising symbolic completion for Ripley; wholeness is achieved through a willingness to subscribe to the demands of authority.

The dual movement of denial and acceptance of the alien lifeform in *Aliens* corresponds to the prohibition placed on the return to the primordial wholeness of the maternal body and results in the performance of the renounced object. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler argues that the prohibition placed on the lost object, be it homosexual desire or the maternal body, results in the "incorporation of the attachment as identification ... a psychic form of preserving the object" (134). This reterritorialization of the lost object is visible in the opening stages of *Aliens* when Ripley is consistently haunted by memories of the alien attack on *Nostramo*, evidence of both the internalization of the abject and the formative experience of birth. More importantly, Butler claims that following the internalization of the lost object, society requires the renunciation of the desire for the object in order to establish parameters of normalcy (142-143). Speaking specifically about homosexual desire, Butler claims that the object is retained only through renunciation, which, paradox-

ically, is the performance of the prohibition against homosexual desire itself. As she further explains:

masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love; a feminine gender is formed (taken on, assumed) through the incorporative fantasy by which the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love, an exclusion never grieved, but “preserved” through heightened feminine identification. (146)

For Butler, the “straight man *becomes* (mimes, cites, appropriates, assumes the status of) the man he ‘never’ loved and ‘never’ grieved” (145). The implication is that the very thing the Law refuses to allow is the very thing the subject must perform to be recognized within the representational economy (145). Coded as lacking because of the loss of her crew, Ripley’s symbolic completion depends on a similar performance of the prohibition placed on the lost object; rather than embody the man she “never” loved as in Butler’s formulation, Ripley must perform the role of ideal mother that cannot exist.

The Weyland-Yutani Corporation informs Ripley that her pilot’s license will be reinstated if she leads the colonial marines safely through the alien-infested terraforming colony. In the subsequent narrative, Ripley transitions from woman to mother—a process of subjection that is facilitated at constant intervals by the Law itself. The clearest instance of this transition occurs when she encounters the lone survivor of the alien attack, Newt—a young, blonde-haired girl who has successfully hidden from the alien lifeforms and, therefore, has knowledge of safe routes that promise the colonial marines the chance to survive. Newt embodies Lee Edelman’s figure of the Child who represents the horizon of the future (3–20); once the marines and Ripley confirm the presence of alien lifeforms, the marines’ chief motive is to escape, but for Ripley, it is to rescue Newt. In protecting the “adopted” child, Ripley performs the role of mother and caregiver, which gives her even greater acceptance from the masculine-centric marines. More importantly, the imaginary resonance attributed to the pilot’s license, a promise of returned legitimacy and freedom, is transferred to the child. If Ripley can properly mother the child, she can secure a future for herself and assuage the guilt that plagues her after not being able to properly “mother” her crew.

However, the pinnacle of Ripley’s transition to motherhood culminates in the figure of the Alien Queen, who is encountered near the conclusion of the film. This placement of the Alien Queen allows it to be retroactively posited as an ideal version of maternity. The climactic reveal, which shows the queen descending in all of her grandiose monstrosity, makes it possible to view her as a discursive construct. Before the discovery of the grotesque queen, Carter

Burke, the representation of the Law, says that the Weyland-Yutani Corporation desires alien specimens for its biological weapons research division: “Those two specimens are worth millions to the bioweapons division. Now, if you’re smart, we can both come out of it as heroes and we’ll be set up for life.” This statement is supplemented by the fact that Carter Burke attempts to lock Ripley and Newt in a laboratory with the alien “face-sucker” so that Ripley may be impregnated by the specimen. These two occasions, among many, establish characteristics sanctioned by the Law; a reproductive body that is, nevertheless, capable of military action. Therefore, when Ripley initially encounters the Alien Queen, she is not merely facing an intimidating creature surrounded by a multitude of her offspring but an Absolute Subject of maternity, who perfectly encapsulates the desires of paternal authority. In the moment when she faces the Alien Queen, there is an immediate *misrecognition*, whereby Ripley is interpellated through the image of the queen—a figure that by her overwhelming “wholeness” reflects the promise of completeness through subjection to paternal authority.

The hypermonstrosity of the queen comes to signify her irrefutable position as a maternal subject who lacks nothing, yet this wholeness is achieved through a subscription to phallic Law. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the phallic mother is a paradoxical phantasmatic figure retroactively posited by the child to assuage castration anxiety with the promise that the phallus can be regained (Cornell 52). Traditionally, the phallic mother has been characterized as a representative of destructive femininity, yet as Justyna Sempruch makes clear, it is actually the archaic mother that “represents a terrifying fantasy of sexual difference, while the phallic mother is a comforting fantasy of sexual sameness” (66). Whereas the archaic mother is seen in Scott’s *Alien*, represented by the unsymbolizable wholeness prior to castration, the phallic mother can be viewed in the figure of the Alien Queen, specifically because she represents *symbolizable wholeness*. The Queen is the result of a “de-gendering of the archaic mother,” and her grotesque form bears the clear markings of phallicism (Jonte-Pace 19). As with the phallic mother, the Alien Queen is an Oedipal symbolization of her archaic counterpart, which is filtered through the lens of phallogocentrism, a collection of sanctioned traits that Ripley must perform (Starks 139). In the initial meeting between Ripley and the Queen, the former gazes in terror at the collection of eggs that the Queen has produced, but this realization eventually gives way to a look of recognition and, I would argue, figures as a moment of “reciprocal identification” with the Queen as the Absolute Subject of the Law (Stewart-Steinberg 7-8). Ripley misrecognizes herself in the Queen, who signifies in all of her phallic glory that wholeness is achieved through subjection to paternal Law.

The climactic battle between Ripley and the Alien Queen is little more than an imitation of the phallic mother, wherein the former acquiesces to the demands of the Law to achieve symbolic recognition. Having witnessed Ripley destroy all her offspring in their previous encounter on the base, the Queen attempts to bar Ripley and Newt's escape, initiating the infamous battle between the two maternal bodies in which Ripley emerges in the exosuit to defend her adopted child. The moment in Cameron's film when Ripley arrives encased in the exosuit unabashedly signifies what Bruce Isaacs has identified as the director's "protagonist-female metamorphoses into an organic/machinic hybrid through a symbiosis of organic and technological body" (234). The only way for Ripley to be recognized within the phallogocentric economy and to be vindicated for the loss of her crew is to embody the phallic mother herself by donning the suit, a phallic extension that compensates for her lack and makes her strength comparable to the Queen's. It is only after Ripley defeats the Alien Queen by expelling her through an airlock that Newt refers to her for the first time as "mother." This moment of recognition is amplified by the closing scenes of the film that show Ripley and her adopted daughter, but also Hicks, her new lover, and the disemboweled android, Bishop, who serves as little more than a grotesque pet in the portrait of the "nuclear" family. Having secured a heteronormative future by rescuing the blond-haired Newt, Ripley is rewarded with a family, which replaces the void left by the death of her crew.

Films such as *Alien* and *Aliens* provide interesting lenses for viewing the progression of the maternal subject and the way in which it is structured within the phallic network. Traditionally, the realm of the semiotic and the originary wholeness of the maternal body are viewed as beyond phallic control, yet what these particular films show is how the very psychic retention of abjection can be used to facilitate subjection. Ripley's "performance" of the phallic mother continues throughout the remainder of the films in the franchise, suggesting a vision of maternity as a revolving process of subjection to a phallic ideal that at once requires and punishes any form of deviance. Her entire storyline reads as a desperate attempt to reclaim an imaginary object that is always seemingly out of reach but is always promised by the shadowy figures of authority around her. Furthermore, examining how internalized trauma, perhaps, discursively forms these ideologically saturated images of maternity helps to successfully navigate them.

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