Screen Memories

Hollywood Cinema on the Psychoanalytic Couch
Reimagining the Gargoyle: Psychoanalytic Notes on Alien and the Contemporary “Cruel” Horror Film

I admire its purity... a survivor, unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality.

—Ash, Science Officer, the Nostromo
*Alien: Nostromo*’s crew awakens from hypersleep and the “Mother” computer’s meager sustenance. With the unmasking of the Company’s plot to capture the monster, “Mother’s” questionable nurturing will turn definitively noxious.
If *Hair* proclaimed the Age of Aquarius, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) surely celebrated its last gasp. According to Steven Spielberg's vision, our troubles would be resolved by Aquarian consciousness-raising sessions conducted by relentlessly benevolent extraterrestrials. But then a strettto of disasters put paid to the aspirations of Woodstock Nation. Three Mile Island, the plunging dollar, the spectacle of the American imperium held hostage by shabby ideologues—these and sundry other narcissistic injuries refurbished our pessimism, setting us to brood upon apocalypse.

With the situation so grim below, how could we remain sanguine about the good intentions of celestial messengers? Through that obscure feedback process by which the cinematic dream factory translates inchoate collective angst into extravagant scenarios, we have been served up an outer-space ghoulie to match the proper paranoia of the day—*Alien* (1979).

Despite its contemporary iconography, *Alien* hearkens back to the malignant conception of unearthly life found in fifties science fiction, during another watershed of national self-doubt and paranoia. In the setting of spreading global communism, fading postwar prosperity, and the renewed threat of nuclear holocaust, Hollywood disgorged an army of implacable invaders, feasting upon flesh and blood, like the brainy carotid of *The Thing* (1951), or cannibilizing consciousness, like the emotionally neutered Pod People of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).
*Alien* contains numerous citations to these fifties classics, allusions to *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and similar arcana that excite cultists, but hardly make for big box office. Nor does *Alien*'s populist political stance and debatable feminism explain its staggering popularity. "In space, no one can hear you scream," the promo poster tantalizes. It shows a cracked egg, backlit harshly. Dared to discover the source of this soundless scream, we go to the theater, gag on bloody recognitions, then—according to demographics—return again for more. The "repeater" phenomenon of past "weird" films has become even more significant with recent horror hits like *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Alien*. How to explain it?

I have elsewhere suggested that part of the weird genre's vast appeal resides in its flamboyant catharsis of our *timor moris*. ¹ This bizarre cure becomes worse than the disease it addresses when horror surpassing ordinary psychological tolerance cancels spectatorial pleasure, nullifies catharsis. Many viewers then undergo a kind of post-traumatic stress; the film acts upon them as a nightmare from which it is difficult to fully "awaken" after leaving the theater.

The creators of vintage fantasy mostly refused to violate our childlike faith that the weird movie might scare us but never really harm us—saving the rare catastrophic reaction of the exceptionally vulnerable viewer. This fragile trust was irrevocably abrogated by Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 benchmark masterpiece, *Psycho*. The English Hammer Studios productions flooded the screen with stylized gore in the fifties, but *Psycho* truly legitimized the show of violence to large general audiences. With extraordinary craft, Hitchcock welded to the excesses of the Grand Guignol a panoply of disturbing, perverse psychological motifs—rape, voyeurism, necrophilia—which had previously been explored more distantly and tactfully. Never had viewers been so cunningly seduced by a mere "thriller" into attending scenes of eroticized butchery.

Paradoxically, this species of trauma encourages repeated exposure, not out of masochism, but the very human wish for *mastery*, to prove to the vulnerable self that one can face mortal danger and survive. Many viewers rushed to *Psycho* on a dare as they would later rush to *Alien*, and got far more than they bargained for. They told their friends; everyone came back in droves. Concentration camp survivors, in a desperate attempt to master the unmasterable, often dream themselves back into torment. Analogously, *Psycho*, more than any previous horror film, compelled us against our better judgment to seek out hell at the Bijou.
"Cruel" Horror Cinema

Psycho's financial and artistic success spurred the escalation of violence throughout cinema, especially within the weird genre. It became the prototype for a subgenre I will categorize as "cruel" or "hardcore" horror, comprising pictures that skirt the edge of the impermissible visually and psychologically, or plunge over the edge.

Shot on low budgets, employing unknown actors and waning Hollywood luminaries, many cruel films piled up fortunes on the drive-in/exploitation circuit. The best—or most notorious—of these frightful cheapies are Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), Night of the Living Dead (1968), The Hills Have Eyes (1977), Last House on the Left (1972), and, more recently, Halloween (1978), Friday the 13th (1980), A Nightmare on Elm Street (1985), and sequels. Huge profits from exploitation screening eventually restored cruel cinema to the legitimacy Psycho had acquired. Expensive, high—production value shockers like The Exorcist, The Omen (1976), and Carrie (1976) generated megabucks through massive distribution to family audiences. Although the number of cruel films produced has somewhat declined, the subgenre still does well at the box office, and exceptionally well in videotape.

It is a monument to Psycho's enduring power that its elegant or execrable spinoffs continue to reflect its cynical appraisal of the human condition and its coolly harmful attitude toward the audience. In cruel cinema, any possibility for a healing catharsis is deliberately sacrificed in favor of overwhelming the viewer's capacity to endure psychic pain. The attack may be crafted with exquisite visual manipulations, and little if any actual onscreen violence—viz., John Carpenter's work in The Fog (1980). It may be unremittingly raw, as in the nonstop carnage of George Romero's films. Or it may modulate between a raw and cool approach, as in the cinema of De Palma.

The Weltanschauung that informs Psycho and its cruel successors is paranoid/Hobbesian. Hitchcock predicates exploitation as the central experience of relatedness. He elaborates an articulating chain of victims and victimizers which culminates in a monstrous exploitation situated at the epicenter of family life—the tainted symbiosis between Norman Bates and his malevolent mom. Since Psycho, the cruel movie has busily engendered similar monstrosities, born out of disturbed family relations (Carrie), or inserted into the family by malignant outside forces (The Omen, Rosemary's Baby [1968], The Exorcist). Alternately, the family en-
tire is presented as a deviant monster (Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The Hills Have Eyes). For a lengthier discussion of this trend and its ramification, the reader is referred to Robin Wood’s admirable essay, “The Return of the Repressed.”

Cruel cinema has also powerfully discoursed on the exploitative viciousness Hitchcock saw lurking within family life. Sometimes a family member will transform suddenly into a monster, turning savagely upon spouse, parent, siblings (Night of the Living Dead, The Children [1980]). Or, monstrous from birth, the child-beast feeds upon strangers (It’s Alive! [1974]). The monstrous family preys upon its own, or maintains its perverse solidarity by attacking outsiders (The Hills Have Eyes). Murder and rapine flourish, but the signatory crime of cruel cinema is cannibalism.

The taint of cannibalism is subliminal in Psycho. Hitchcock dwells predominantly on the devouring of psychic identity—a theme privileged in the weird genre. Norman and his mummified Mum dine upon each other’s egos. Mrs. Bates’s withered husk is emblematic of that foul feast, the ghastly image of her shrunken skull, her leathery lips pulled back into a charnelhouse grin, evoked a ravening orality. Vastly potent, it provoked less fastidious talents after Hitchcock to “embody” the devouring of the self’s substance, in the loathsome consumptions of the cannibalistic family monster.

The celebration of cannibalism reaches its zenith with the most traumatizing movies ever made—George Romero’s Dead trilogy, Texas Chainsaw Massacre, and The Hills Have Eyes. In the Romero cycle, the newly dead rise again through some inexplicable agency to become ghouls. Amidst the wholesale slaughter, the cannibalistic corruption of family relationships is particularly harrowing. Mortally wounded loved ones succumb, then resurrect to tear their bereaved into pieces. Texas Chainsaw Massacre and The Hills Have Eyes, respectively, present psychotic and mutant families which sustain themselves by eating intruders. Their bloodthirsty orgies leave nothing to the imagination. Norma Bates’s mummified skull is repeatedly reincarnated: in the half-eaten skull that first reveals ghoulish attack in Night of the Living Dead, in the skull-cum-lamp of Texas Chainsaw Massacre, in the severed head of the tourist father which the mutant patriarch of The Hills Have Eyes impales upon a stake.

Besides deriding the family “togetherness” valorized by the American heartland, these films also satirize the competitiveness central to the
American dream. In *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), Romero’s zombies are drawn to a huge shopping mall. They totter about the aisles in a grotesque parody of conspicuous consumerism until living prey attracts them. In *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes*, the cannibalistic behavior of the deviant families is wittily counterpoised against the competitive striving of the “normals” who have wandered onto their turf. Capitalism is pictured as a less egregious form of the deviant’s cannibalism, a normative rapacity sanctioned by culture and family. Wood mordantly observes that the family of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* only carries to its logical conclusion “the basic (though unstated) tenet of capitalism that people have the right to live off other people. . . . Cannibalism represents the ultimate in possessiveness, hence the logical end of human relations under capitalism.”

I will now undertake a reading of *Alien* as legitimate inheritor of *Psycho* and its cruel lineage regarding its stylistic conventions, its frontal attack upon viewer sensibility, and its reinvention of the above motifs in outer space—particularly its Hobbesian perception of degraded relationships within family and state. My interpretations are based on what the film shows and says, plus information furnished by Ridley Scott, *Alien*’s director and guiding intelligence.  

*Alien*’s Mise-en-scène

The film opens with the letters “A—L—I—E—N” slowly etching themselves in a futuristic/runic script. Behind them the camera tracks across the galactic void. Cut to a long shot of a space vehicle, hovering over subtitles:

Commercial Towing Vehicle: “The Nostromo”

Crew: Seven

Cargo: Refinery processing twenty million tons of ore

Course: Returning to earth

After these slim facts about the Nostromo and its mission, the viewer is set squarely down in media res. One then pieces out an exceptionally vivid impression of *Alien*’s time, unencumbered by those self-conscious explanations about “how we came to be here” that so often has marred the science-fiction film.
The *Nostromo*'s formidable technology constitutes a dull given for its people. The ship is a high-tech rustbucket, a old warhorse of the interstellar "Company's" merchant fleet, returning not from Ulyssian adventures, but prosaic commercial enterprise. Its crew is also extraordinary. Like their well-worn surroundings, they are utterly and rather wonderfully there, a collection of competent loners one would find aboard a similar vessel in ancient Phoenicia or the East India trade.

Most viewers come to *Alien* old cinema spacehands, too—not as inclined to gasp at outer-space vistas after a glut of *Star Wars* (1977) special effects. *Alien*’s creators have subsumed the audience’s tacit acceptance of the previously marvelous, in order to manipulate the gleaming mechanics of "straight" science fiction toward darker ends.

The *Nostromo* complex consists of several refineries—half-spheroids topped by towers and spires—linked to a central tug module. In the first long shot the entire structure looks like a warren of abandoned gothic cathedrals, suspended in midair. One’s impression is distinctly not of the future, but of some indeterminate fantasy realm—Oz, or more pointedly, the terrible dark houses of vintage horror cinema: Dr. Frankenstein’s mountain laboratory, Dracula’s aerie, even the Bates’s Victorian mansion.

The next shot is a tight close-up of the *Nostromo*'s massive ventral plane rumbling across frame. This detailed immensity has been a commonplace of genre iconography since *2001* (1968), rendering tomorrow’s apparatus awesome and tangible. But here, instead of being lit starkly (another commonplace), the ship’s surface is sunken in shadow, vaguely threatening. The *Nostromo*’s "terrible house" equivalencies, combined with the darkness of the ship’s surface in the subsequent passing shot, at once kindle a feeling of disquieting ambiguity that pervades the flat "suchness" of space-age technology throughout the film. More than any previous work (including *Metropolis* [1926]), *Alien* evokes simultaneous resonances within the horror and science-fiction canons in representing a future milieu.

This feat is accomplished by extraordinary design which imbues futuristic hardware with haunting "horric" connotations quite apart from function: viz., the hieratic helmets—they resemble *Aztec skulls!*—resting upon the dead computer terminals in the deserted control room at the film’s beginning. Ridley Scott’s vision of *Nostromo*'s hardware also shifts facilely between the locutions of science fiction and the hor-
ror/suspense film. For example, the decks are first presented as a maze of unexceptional storerooms, conduits, grills, and greasy machinery. As tension mounts, Scott transforms them into a tenebrous labyrinth, filled with false leads and murderous cul-de-sacs, through which the crew members stalk or are stalked by the elusive monster.

I cite only one of the numerous paraphrases of classic horror cinema during these sequences: Brett, seeking Jones the cat, approaches Nostromo’s cavernous undercarriage storeroom. Through subjective camera work, the gates seem to advance toward him, charged with an ineluctable menace—just as the front doors of the Bates house in Psycho seem to move eerily toward Vera Miles, as she goes to penetrate the mystery behind them.

The unsettling quality of the “ordinary” future environment foregrounds the unabashed weirdness of the wrecked derelict. Much of the uncanniness in the derelict’s exploration derives not from the outlandishness of the vessel, but from the nagging similarity of its structures to human organs, particularly the organs of reproduction (reflecting Alien’s preoccupation with monstrous gestations).

The entire craft resembles a stupendous uterine-fallopian system. The crew members enter the ship through one of three unmistakably vaginal hatches. The main deck is shaped like an enormous spine/rib cage. Kane, lowered into the bowels of the derelict, discovers the Alien hatch laid out in the pelvis of a mighty vertebral column. The fossilized “space jockey’s” giant skeleton rests upon a control chair, from which juts a huge penile shaft. The chair itself resembles an operating table; here, eons ago, some unfortunate pilot from another race died of the same catastrophic Caesarean which later terminates Kane.

Science fiction frequently offers an “acceptable” rationale for frightening psychotic or archaic mental phenomena. Clinical corollaries of the derelict’s megalithic anatomy are found in the changes in body image experienced during a hallucinatory drug trip or an acute schizophrenic episode. One recalls Victor Tausk’s intriguing hypothesis that the paranoid schizophrenic projects the skewed sense of his own body into the crazy design of the “influencing machine.”

These distortions are thought to be extravagant elaborations of early percepts of self and “Other.” The uncanny feelings aroused in the viewer by the derelict’s great innards may likewise be rooted in infantile oceanic impressions of one’s body and of the immense, ineffably mysterious
physicality of nurturing adults. In this regard, the investigation of the derelict has been interpreted as a symbolic return to the maternal womb and beyond, an oneiric quest for truth about the origins of being.  

The Anatomy of a Monster

No matter how evocative the milieu, the monster film ultimately stands or falls on the believability of its inhuman protagonist. Many promising films have foundered when the monster stood ludicrously revealed—a “man in a rubber suit.” Neither talent nor cash was spared by Alien’s production team in manufacturing a credible being. Superbly executed and artfully deployed, the Alien is one of the most frightening monsters ever brought to the screen. The qualities owned separately by the best of the breed have been gathered together under one hide: the creature is mysteriously ungraspable, viciously implacable, improbably beautiful, and lewd.

Ungraspability

Weird literary masterpieces like the stories of M. R. James triumph through discretion, an elegant paucity of illustration. In the horror film the naked face of Thanatos is also best sparingly revealed, lest the indescribable be described or the unnamable named. Like the dim memory of repressed trauma, what frightens us most is likely to be half-glimpsed, seized and rehearsed in each viewer’s intuition of the terrible. In this regard, Ridley Scott made an astute decision, over the objections of others in his production team, to show his exquisitely designed monster briefly and ambiguously.

The explosion of a seething tongue of flesh out of the Alien egg lasts the blur of an instant. The only version of the creature that registers in detail is the “face hugger”; besides the egg form, it’s the most quiescent of the Alien’s stages, befitting its relatively passive function as Kane’s nurturer. The “chest burster” form is still for a few seconds before it careens out of the mess.

The adult Alien is seen in quick flashes during its attacks on Brett, Dallas, Lambert, and Parker, briefly when Ripley meets it on her way to the shuttlecraft, and for no more than several minutes in the final sequence. In the sum of all its mutations, the Alien is on camera less than any other classic cinema monster, with the possible exception of The Thing’s Carrotman (who also makes lightninglike entrances and exits,
and whose longest appearance occurs in a final confrontation with his human adversaries.

The adult Alien is photographed so obliquely that a coherent gestalt can never be constructed. When it drops upon Brett it seems like a huge phallic tube. During Lambert’s slaughter, one only sees a sinuous tail curling around her leg. Fully 90 percent of the Alien footage consists of close-ups of its head and jaws, from which one bears away a hobgoblin vision of metalloid skullbrow, cruelly curling lips, needle-teeth dripping luminescent saliva—Alien’s reprise of Norma Bates’s skull. The entire creature appears for the first and last time in the shuttlecraft, but the viewer’s sight is obscured by flashing strobes within the ship, and by the dazzling engine exhaust outside. Scott thus compels the viewer to piece together an impression of the monster based on tantalizing fragments, fleshted out by the potent nuances of subjective fantasy, surely the scarriest beast of all.

The Alien’s enigmatic appearance is further compounded by its mutability. King Kong’s genes dictate no other form but hairy apehood, nor is Frankenstein’s monster about to burst his stitches and assume other shapes. But like the Old Man of the Sea, awful transformations are native to the Alien’s life cycle, central to its survival. The awareness of its quick-change potential keeps the viewer in a state of even greater unease, anticipating what chimerical composition the creature will choose in its next reincarnation.

In keeping with this ambiguity of shape, Ridley Scott deliberately provides the sketchiest information about the Alien’s developmental phases. It is a Linnean nightmare, defying every natural law of evolution, by turns bivalve, crustacean, reptilian, and humanoid. It seems capable of lying dormant within its egg indefinitely. It sheds its skin like a snake, its carapace like an arthropod. It deposits its young within other species like a wasp.

Intermediate or alternate stages are hinted at, but never clarified. Scott deleted a sequence in which Ripley discovers Brett and Dallas in cocoons. Dallas is still alive, in agony and recognizably human. Brett is dead; the shrunken husk of his body contains the larval Alien, and has further progressed in dreadful metamorphosis toward the egg form. From this scene, one could easily discover that the eggs in the derelict’s hatch were deposited within the bodies of its crew millennia ago to await another unwary host. But Scott obviously thought closure satisfaction would be better sacrificed in order to keep the Alien an awesome enigma.
One further intuits that the Alien's mutability is not solely dictated by a fixed if remarkably various life cycle, but by formidable mechanisms that allow it to change literally second by second, in conformation with the changing stresses of its milieu. It thus responds according to Lamarckian and Darwinian principles. When it attacks Ripley, it looks much smaller and more humanoid than before. Several observers, Ridley Scott included, have rather horribly suggested that its next manifestation would be fully human—at least on the outside!

*Implacability*

Movie monsters frequently provoke fear and pity because they embody the persecuted outsider, excluded from quotidian joys and sorrows. In Karloff’s poignant portrayal, Frankenstein’s creation became a misunderstood, battered child who identified with its oppressors. It only gave back in kind the ill treatment afforded by its laboratory “parents” and society at large. Even Dracula drew a measure of compassion in Lugosi’s performance because of the eternal torment of his immortality.

The Alien stems from a different line of monsters, creations that provoke terror untempered by sympathy because of the inhumanity of their form, their divorce from human concerns, or the catastrophic nature of their onslights. Examples of “unsympathetic” monsters with inhuman shapes include the giant insects, lizards, and crustaceans of the postatomic era (*Them* [1954], *The Giant Gila Monster* [1959], *Attack of the Crab Monsters* [1957], assorted globs of undifferentiated protoplastic goo like *The Blob* [1958] or *Caltsiki, Immortal Monster* [1959], vile extraterrestrial phantasmagoria like the demonic Martian grasshoppers of *Five Million Years to Earth* [1967]).

The unsympathetic creature’s lack of empathy may originate in its lack of wit, wedded to an enormous appetite. On the other hand, its brainpower may be so vastly superior (viz., the invaders of *War of the Worlds* [1953]), that humankind exists for it as mere fodder, or so much underbrush to be cleared away. Its attack is devastating, merciless. The victim is expunged, erased, body disintegrated, dismembered, or consumed; or else the marrow of psychic identity is sucked dry, leaving an envelope of dumb flesh for colonization.

The Alien being is patently inhuman in its earlier versions, and the adult form is never sufficiently humanoid to promote easy identification. Its IQ is problematic; it cannot be easily dismissed as a digestive machine propelled by a peabrain—*Jaws* in space. It demonstrates exceptional
cunning while hunting the crew in its instant grasp of the Nostromo’s layout, and its decision to secrete itself aboard the shuttlecraft. It is not inconceivable that it can read the crew’s thoughts (the possibility they might communicate with it is never entertained).

The ruthlessness of the Alien’s attack is typically unrelenting: its victims are sundered or totally annihilated. Kane is eviscerated by the nativity of the beast; Brett is hauled off by the adult Alien, leaving only a scream behind. Dallas vanishes in the airshaft as if into thin air, a dot on Lambert’s tracking screen—there one moment, gone the next.

Cornered by the Alien, Parker is garrotted—by what is not made clear. Next, there is a quick shot of an uncertain gourd of flesh (head? belly?) pierced by a toothy ramrod. Then the Alien’s tail snakes around Lambert’s leg, and the camera cuts briefly to a close-up of her terrified face. When Ripley arrives, all the viewer is allowed to see is Parker, hunched against a bulkhead, intact but obviously dead, as Lambert’s naked and bloody foot dangles out of focus in foreground. By careful editing, Ridley Scott leaves the exact manner of the victims’ passage nearly blank, once again compelling the viewer to conjure from fantasy the direst account of their deaths.

**Beauty**

 Much of the Alien’s fascination resides in its unexpected loveliness. The “face hugger” and “chest burster” stages are frankly repellent. But the adult Alien owns a sumptuous elegance. The robotic simulacrum of the heroine in Metropolis, and the Gillman of Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954) nearly approach this nacreous beauty. The creature’s architecture is skeletal, fleshed out with a kind of flayed musculature reminiscent of Vesalius’s anatomical engravings. The bony elements are supplemented by strange, streamlined mechanical structures, cartilaginous rods and pistons. The creature’s skin is glistening black; a long, lustrous grey porpoise head is fitted behind a skull’s facies; the outside jaws are studded with rows of stainless-steel teeth. Here is the charnelhouse aesthetic of the medieval Dance of Death; the hellish apparitions of Bosch; the figurations of Tibetan demonology.

**Sensuality**

 A few inhabitants of Monster Alley are not without lubrious intentions—viz., Kong’s moony courtship of Anne Darrow, or the Frankenstein monster’s confused erotic designs upon its creator’s fiancée. How-
ever, sensuality is not usually within the purview of the unsympathetic movie monster. With rare exceptions—the mutant amphibians of *Humans from the Deep* (1980)—the unsympathetic creature’s depredations are too obliterating, its appearance or disposition insufficiently humanoid to project a believable sexuality.

The Alien manifests no erotic intention until its lust erupts during the final showdown with Ripley. Until then, the crew members have shown little sexual interest either, compared with the clumsy yearnings weird cinema frequently depicts between heterosexual shipmates cloistered in deep space, mad doctors and their intended brides, intrepid military types and their scientist girlfriends. When Ripley steps out of her fatigues, she becomes intensely desirable and achingly vulnerable. The sight of her nearly nude body is highly arousing in the context of the film’s previous sexual neutrality, as well as the relaxation that follows the *Nostromo*’s destruction and the creature’s supposed death. Precisely at this moment, the Alien unfolds out of its hiding place.

Unlike the blinding speed of its earlier assaults, it moves slowly, languorously. It stretches out its phallic head as if preening. Ripley, her horrified gaze fixed hypnotically upon it, retreats stealthily into the equipment locker. It extends a ramrod tongue, tipped with hinged teeth dripping with luminescent slime (actually, K-Y jelly!), and hisses voluptuously. The very air is charged with the palpable threat of rape—and worse. There is no square-jawed hero to rescue this damsel in distress. Unlike Fay Wray and a legion of impotent screaming Mimos, Ripley saves herself. Her combat with her exhibitionistic assailant bears the patents of sexual engagement.

She slips into a space suit, crooning a *love ditty* to curb her panic: “You . . . are . . . my . . . lucky . . . star . . .” Repeating “lucky . . . lucky . . . lucky . . .,” she creeps out of the locker and straps herself into the pilot’s chair. Her breathing, amplified within her helmet, is heard in accelerating gasps and moans (a libidinous variation on the famous sequence in *2001* [1968] in which Dave Bowman’s breathing is heard echoing in his own ears as he disconnects the murderous HAL).

The Alien rushes upon her, maddened by poisonous gases she has triggered. Her face is sweaty, her expression dazed, very nearly ecstatic. With an orgasmic wail, she slams her hand down upon the control panel and blows away the hatch. The monster hurtles out, then grips the entryway. She discharges an ejaculatory bolt from the grapnel gun that
strikes the creature full in its chest, flinging it into space. Simultaneously suffering with her, and voyeur to her victimization, the viewer (especially the male viewer) experiences a powerful commingling of raw sexual excitement and mortal terror, an effect often sought but rarely achieved so well in suspense cinema.

Innards and Other Outrages

Like Hitchcock and De Palma, Ridley Scott incites terror in Alien through a clever blend of suggestion, indirection, and confrontation. The film contains almost as little actual onscreen mayhem as Psycho. Horror is elicited rather by sophisticated manipulations of the medium.

Alien's considerable cruel reputation is based on two extraordinary gobbets of overt violence flung in the viewer's face: the birth of the Alien through Kane's shattered chest, and Science Officer Ash's dismantling by Parker. The “chest burster” sequence merits particular attention since it is probably the main reason many people have been dared into seeing the movie, or have returned to see it again.

Scott sets up the scene by lulling the viewer into a state of false calm. The anxiety which has been adroitly built up abates with the creature's supposed death and Kane's reawakening. The viewer identifies with the crew's relief; is disarmed by their highjinks during the celebratory meal; then is plunged into even deeper, disorganizing terror by Kane's awful fate. This "ratchet" effect—sharply lowering tension with a leaven of humor, then sharply escalating it so that it impacts more profoundly—is a staple of the genre, and never employed to better effect.

When Kane sickens, Parker and Ash wrestle him onto the mess table. His chest heaves, swells, a stain of blood spreads over his tunic, then the head of the infant Alien thrusts viciously out, spattering the appalled onlookers with gouts of gore and visceral shreds (Scott had his actors unexpectedly showered with entrails bought from a nearby butcher shop to achieve their howls of shocked surprise!). The Alien looks like a dehisced organ or loop of gut, until it fully emerges as a murderous embryo. One is marginally aware of Kane's hands in the frame's periphery, clawed in agony. Parker lunges forward, a knife in his hand. Ash stops him. The creature emits a sizzling hiss and rockets away, a long, reptilian tail whipping out behind it.

The most traumatizing aspect of the sequence is Kane's unexpected disembowelment. The overwhelming loathing and fear related to eviscera-
tion has rarely been addressed in the analytic literature. While the smooth exterior is readily conceptualized, a completely realistic or pleasing picture of the "insides" is not likely to be found in the average citizen's body image. A nauseous vision is usually summoned up of a smelly claustrophobia, stuffed with slippery ropes and lumps of flesh. One knows the vitals are vital to life, that food is processed, energy generated, the seeds of life itself planted within one's proper entrails, but it still seems necessary to the psychic economy to keep the guts safely contained, relegated to darkness.

Disembowelment abrogates this touchy sequestration irrevocably. The self's fragile envelope is definitively breached: once the abdomen is ripped open, how can Humpty Dumpty ever be put right again? After his tiny invader leaves him a gurled husk on the mess table, Kane's deadness is absolutely unassailable, a crushing narcissistic wound like Janet Leigh's death in *Psycho*, to viewers who had imagined themselves omnipotently secure outside the screen.

The discovery that Ash is a robot doesn't make the spilling of his entrails less unpalatable. His evisceration, coupled with his bizarre resurrection, is even more traumatic. Ridley Scott gives the viewer a closer look at Ash's guts—unwholesome gizmos that spout greenish hydraulic goo. After Parker decapitates him with a fire extinguisher, Ash's head is rewired at a distance from his unpacked torso. His voice a dispassionate gurgle, a tiny smile plays across his lips as he expresses genteel sympathy for his shipmates' fate: "I can't lie to you about your chances, but you have my sympathy." The utter morbidity of the moment beggars description.

Kane serves as prime focus of *Alien*'s complex birth imagery. His intrusion into the hatch, his penetration of the blue force field, the touch of his hand that discharges the Alien out of its egg, all may be read as symbolic fertilizations. Kane is thereby uncannily implicated as subject and object in a horrific account of the primal scene. As if in talion retribution, the scene recoils upon him; his punishment for viewing and participating in the forbidden act of conception is a spectacular (!) death precipitated by the Alien's birth.8 I submit that each viewer's catastrophic response to Kane's disembowelment may well be determined by reactivation of personal archaic fantasies about the primal scene and the birth process, in addition to the dynamics elucidated above.

Finally, the "chest burster" sequence epitomizes the leitmotif of *Alien*: within a dark claustrophobia filled with real, simulated, or symbolic vitals, a
supremely potent menace lurks, waiting to tear apart and devour its unsuspecting victims. For Kane, the menace literally lives within his guts. For the remaining crew, their ship becomes one great cloaca through which the beast prowls, Grendel-like, to pick them off at its pleasure. Their plight acquires an added claustrophobic piquancy by the immensity of galactic space surrounding them into which they can neither “shit out” the Alien, or expel themselves. The menace concealed within Ash’s bionic entrails is his secret function as the Company’s creature. And the Company is the direst menace of all, a treacherous Leviathan that gnaws away at the vitals of Alien’s society.

Of Corporate Depredations and the Family Monster

The Nostromo’s crew may be analyzed as a symbolic family. In this context, Dallas, the Father/Captain, appears initially passive, increasingly withdrawn, until he is completely eliminated midfilm. The real source of power within this family system is “Mother,” the computer. “She” and the Company she prefigures are futuristic versions of the classic “bad” witch-mother of myth and fairy tale.

The crew is symbiotically dependent upon “Mother,” but her nurturing is at best ineffective, exemplified in the meager sustenance provided by her life-support systems in hypersleep. When the crew awakens, her ministrations turn definitively noxious. With full knowledge beforehand, she reroutes them to certain doom on the asteroid. After Ripley exposes her complicity, the female warrant officer emerges as the nearest thing to a “good” mother on board. But Ripley can only rescue herself and Jones, the ship’s cat, narrowly escaping “Mother”’s last vengeance, the Nostromo’s detonation.

One is told almost nothing about Alien’s culture, but powerful inferences about it can be made by studying the crew. For the most part they are skilled technicians from a conforming middle or upper-middle class. They observe the outward tenets of contemporary American democracy. No one is a focus of obvious discrimination because of sex, class, or color (Parker is black). Everyone seems well fed, well educated, and reasonably well off.

Differences exist in station, but an air of easy, unauthoritarian informality is maintained, possibly consistent with the Nostromo’s status as a merchant rather than a military vessel. Each individual’s competence is tacitly respected. Ripley, one notes, perceives Ash’s failure to provide
more information about the Alien more as a function of his untrustworthiness rather than ineffectiveness. The importance of teamwork is implicitly emphasized.

Yet on closer scrutiny the Nostromo’s democracy smacks of the anthill. The crew address each other by last names only, work efficiently like anonymous cogs. Women stand on exactly equal footing with men to the point of androgyny; they use no makeup, wear the same serviceable clothing as their male counterparts—floppy surgical whites or fatigue uniforms. Although not unattractive, both sexes evince little if any sexual interest.

Except for a few convivial moments, the crew’s interactions are impersonal, tense, and slightly abrasive. Hardly a trace of empathy exists, with the notable exception of the “chum” bond between Parker and his taciturn fellow mechanic Brett (their origins seem working class). Some affection is also elicited by Jones the cat, indicating the capacity for engagement has not withered entirely, if only with the nonhuman environment.

As the Alien’s threat escalates, relations aboard grow more alienated. Dallas betrays a nasty paranoid streak. When Ripley tries to discuss her suspicions about Ash, he snaps: “I don’t trust anybody!” The crew seem bound to each other only by shared fear and vulnerability. They betray little real mourning for their dead except for Parker’s grief when Brett is killed. Even Ripley, who evolves into the most humanized character, never overtly shows more than momentary anguish over her lost comrades.

Kane’s maimed funeral rites offer a paradigm of the pervasive dehumanization afflicting the crew. Dallas reads no formal service over him, an intriguing departure from the convention of fifties classics like Forbidden Planet, in which departed shipmates were assured of a Christian burial in deep space. Instead, the captain coldly inquires: “Does anyone want to say anything?” and when no answer comes, flushes the corpse out of the airlock as dispassionately as emptying a toilet.

It is strongly implied that the source of the Nostromo’s impoverished relationships lies in an overwhelming lust for gain, a life-denying greediness that has extended from the highest levels of Alien’s world to become rooted within the individual psyche. The theme of insatiable orality is subliminally sounded in the beginning of the film: the camera tracks through the empty mess to a close-up of two perpetually feeding plastic gooney birds, bobbing up and down over a cup of water.

After the crew awakens, their first conversation involves Parker’s
noisy demands for a larger share of the profits. He claims those who do the dirty work below decks are exploited by the technocrats above (shades of Metropolis). When Dallas orders the landing, Parker protests that since Nostromo is a commercial ship he will only undertake a rescue operation for extra pay. He complies after Ash drily points out that a clause in his contract makes the investigation mandatory "under penalty of total forfeitures of shares. No MONEY!!!"

Parker strikes a keynote of sour appropriativeness that echoes throughout the film. His type is recognizable today, the "I'm all right, Jack" union stalwart, jealous of petty prerogative, spoiling for a strike, his true ideology to the right of Bismarck. But one should not be misled by the coarseness of his rhetoric; those who walk the upper decks share his greediness. Their motives are merely more suavely disguised. Dallas, for instance, does not seem any more touched by mercy in conducting the rescue operation. The captain is simply a better servant of his employers.

Ingrained personal selfishness may be taken as a pallid reflection of the maniacal greed of the corporate masters ruling Alien's society. They would appear to govern a corrupted galactic democracy that maintains the pretense of libertarian ideals while shamelessly plundering outsiders, and covertly abusing its own citizens. The resources of the Nostromo are deployed to exploit a distant planet's natural resources. In past centuries, the lure from similar missions legitimized subjugation and slaughter of colonial populations. Even the death of those enlisted by the exploiters in pursuit of their golden dreams could be justified by appropriately compensating survivors. The Nostromo's real mission, and the heartless manner in which it has been contrived, illustrate the depth of inhuman exploitativeness which has developed out of the earlier terrestrial excesses of capitalism.

It may be extrapolated that the Company actually deciphered the derelict's transmission some time before the Nostromo's departure. After gleaning that a highly dangerous presence had been encountered by whatever agency responsible for planting the warning beacon, the Company suspected this entity might be useful for its "weapons section." Perhaps it battles with other giant conglomerates like our own Krupps or DuPonts for galactic hegemony, as it hawks ordinance across the universe.

Since it constantly seeks a competitive edge, the Company opts to keep its profile low while retrieving the Alien. Sacrificing safety for stealth, it elects not to send a large, well-equipped expedition. Instead,
an ordinary merchant vessel is chosen whose course has already been scheduled to take it near the planetoid on which the acoustic beacon is located. Hopefully, the beacon site can then be reconnoitered, and the Alien recovered under the guise of a rescue operation, without unduly alerting the suspicions of the crew or potential competitors. After all, investigation of unknown transmissions is required under prevailing maritime law. A rescue operation is what the crew members will probably think they are undertaking to earn their pay, and will perhaps keep thinking if survivors are actually found together with whatever danger lurks on the planetoid.

Besides preserving security, the use of a merchant vessel also saves the major cost of outfitting an expedition. The profit-obsessed Company can therefore possibly kill two birds with one stone, acquiring both the Nostromo's cargo and a new weapon. The complete success of the gamble is, of course, contingent on a docile, or at least manageable Alien—never a reliable possibility in the genre since Kong broke out of his chrome-steel chains at the Rialto.

But the mission's complete success is by no means mandatory. The Company has neither provided the crew with disintegrator weapons to vaporize the creature, nor the means of creating a force field to contain it—devices well within the capabilities of a faster-than-light technology. One theorizes that the highly limited low-tech defenses allotted to the crew—the best they can jury-rig are primitive prods and flamethrowers—attests to the Company's miserliness, as well as its bias in favor of eliminating the human crew to preserve the Alien (and the cargo).

To cover every contingency, the Company substitutes for the Nostromo's regular science officer an android totally obedient to its will, programming Ash and "Mother" to implement its intentions on the mission. One surmises the Company prefers to bring back the Alien without incident without disclosing the evil uses to which it will be put, if Ash can fog the issue by insisting the creature needs to be studied for its intrinsic research value or possible humanitarian benefits. But Ash is also empowered if necessary to sacrifice crew, survivors, the cargo, himself, to return the Alien to the "weapons section." His tactics are passive-aggressive and obfuscatory until Ripley discovers the conspiracy. Then he explodes into an impersonal fury quite matching the Alien's.

Conceive, then, that the "family" of the Nostromo is victimized by three monstrosities, within and without. The clearest danger to its integrity is
the Alien, but it is monstrous only from its victims’ viewpoint. Objectively, there is nothing evil in its nature, for its ceaseless feeding and breeding merely fulfills the imperative of its genetic code—to survive in shifting, inimical environments.

Ash is the second monster, inserted from outside to dwell deceitfully within the family’s bosom, preserving group integrity if such will further his aims, but equally capable of destroying the group to protect the Alien. But Ash is no more culpable or intrinsically evil than the creature, for he is not his own man. His morality is preprogrammed, a cog-and-wheels Darwinism engineered by others to make him a tool fit for their dirty tricks. For him, the Alien’s purity constitutes a robotic ego-ideal, and he is more than halfway toward achieving it . . .

The authentic moral monstrosity of the piece is the Company, and its fellow corporate predators. The Company’s materialism has infected the heart, corroded relationships almost beyond redress, struck hurtfully at the center of individual, group, and family identity. Like the family of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the Company’s feeding upon others to survive and prevail is completely ego-syntonic. It perceives nothing in the least reprehensible about its machinations.

Cruel Cinema as Sullied Polemic

Many critics have theorized that art reflects the psychic tensions generated by a culture’s historic, economic, and technological circumstances. Inimical conditions are believed to provoke dark, disintegrative resonances in the psyches of a culture’s members. More “affirmative” percepts may evolve whenever favorable environments promote higher levels of cultural integration. Employing formal devices consistent with medium and prevailing stylistics, the artist is said to “capture” the culture’s “negative” or “positive” collective psychological valence, a process which occurs largely outside conscious intent.⁹

The motion picture has been widely heralded as an exquisitely sensitive litmus for collective psychic tensions. Weird cinema offers a particularly sensitive index of disintegrative cultural thrusts, elaborated into an idiosyncratic vocabulary of apocalyptic imagery. Both trashy and artful productions of the weird canon therefore deserve serious attention in a politically committed critical practice. Robin Wood observes that the very lack of seriousness with which horror movies are conceived and received encourages *loosening* of censorship for maker and viewer. Super-
ficially innocuous, or downright disreputable weird films may consequently be far more "radical and fundamentally undermining than works of social criticism, which must always concern themselves with the possibility of reforming aspects of a social system whose basic rightness must not be challenged." 10

In opposition to the liberalism of "establishment" reformists like Capra or Kramer, cruel cinema has been waxing exuberantly nihilistic about sacrosanct American values for some time. Alien is the culmination of this trend: it recapitulates in one concentrated scenario the cruel film's fragmented or disguised preoccupations with the deterioration of the quality of life—notably of family life—and the degradation of the social contract under the aegis of capitalism.

The omnipotent monster who preys on puny humans is a common figure in art from earlier phases of cultural disintegration. As the despair of the Dark Ages gave way to the hope of the Gothic Middle Ages, the indomitable Grendel dwindled into the gargoyle, a peripherally removed figure of fun, waiting in the wings to flourish again in darker times. 11 Alien moves the gargoyle back to center stage. Late twentieth-century corporate capitalism, with its unslakable thirst to propagate its vast institutions, is nominated as the sinister force which has reincarnated the omnipotent beast.

The condemnation of a callous, consumerist ethos, obliquely set forth in Texas Chainsaw Massacre and the Romero Dead opus, now emerges undisguised. The Company, playing out its intergalactic scenario of contemporary boardroom smash-and-grab, is emphatically labeled villainous; the Alien recognized as avatar of its unholy scavenging.

The script implies that the Alien is also a warning to the Company cast in its own image. For had the creature been brought to Earth, a dreadful retribution would surely have followed as it fed upon the flesh of its rescuers and bred its own kind with Malthusian vigor. Ripley's courage narrowly averts the extinction of her culture. It is left moot whether she will unmask the Company's perfidy after her return, which might precipitate a galactic Watergate or even send interplanetary revolutionaries to the barricades.

Several critics have suggested that Alien is agitprop in genre masquerade. Lyn Davis and Tom Genelli believe the film functions "as a kind of wakeup call to present-day society . . . to shock us out of our psychic 'hypersleep.'" Our "technological society" breeds environmental and economic ills as numerous as the Alien's mutations because "our left
brain ‘mothers,’ the computers and technocrats who run them, are unable to generate what is needed to solve these problems.”12 The authors further categorize the Alien as the dernier cri of the presumably ungenerative “masculine principle, total aggression without emotion or regard to life.” The answer to the phallic expansionism it symbolizes is the affirmation of “the conservation instinct which we need to reacknowledge, to reincorporate within our collective human body.”13

This “feminine principle” is epitomized by Alien’s heroine. Ripley, as avatar of Kali, the Mother Goddess, perceives the danger of letting Kane and the other explorers back aboard. She is ready to sacrifice a few lives so that millions may live. She searches out the Company’s scheming; exposes Ash’s empty “fathering” of the Alien. She jeopardizes her own escape to rescue Jones the cat, demonstrating her empathy with the nonhuman manifestations of the life force.

I found the Davis-Genelli arguments doubtful in 1980. They seem even less helpful in reassessing Alien and the problematics of cruel cinema in 1986. Several decades of work in psychoanalysis and feminist studies enjoin wariness about erecting gendered “principles” as eternal spiritual/biological verities. Beyond their essentialism, Davis and Genelli have fundamentally erred—perhaps falling prey to wishful thinking—in ascribing to Alien’s creators a degree of mindfulness that simply doesn’t sort with its deliberately traumatizing aspects. Alien remains a masterpiece of the genre. But it also replicates the uncompromising hurtfulness, the amoral “cool” of Psycho and its cruel inheritors, while teasing the audience with a politically “engaged” facade.

Robin Wood remarks that contemporary horror cinema brings “to a focus a spirit of negativity, an undifferentiated lust for destruction, that seems to be not far below the surface of the modern collective consciousness.”14 Not content with mocking the values of its characters as it tears their flesh, cruel cinema assails its audience with that same spirit of negativity, destructiveness, and exploitation Davis and Genelli would have us believe Alien decrees. And what vast profit is garnered in the process—shades of the Company!

The past few decades have witnessed the spread of violence throughout American culture, perpetrated within the family, on our streets, sanctioned at the highest levels of government, whether in the napalmming of children or in subsidizing foreign torturers. The show of overt violence in media has become a commonplace never conceived of in the worst excesses of yellow journalism. Television news passes equably from
the commercial break to the unsparing depiction of the atrocities of war and urban crime. We have gradually become inured, desensitized to violence. Its victims grow increasingly "thinglike," exciting only the briefest twitch of pity or horror before the bloody scene dissolves to the hawking of toothpaste and designer jeans.

It seems to me that cruel cinema merely takes up where the TV screen leaves off, with a greater cachet to treat characters and audience as dumb objects to be exploited toward enormous gain. In the course of transforming the collective angst bred out of a corrupt and corrupting capitalism, the creators of cruel movies, wittingly or otherwise, have allowed their medium to become tainted by the sordid practices of their bête noire. The creators of Alien have perhaps beheld the greedy beast lurking in its lair more accurately; but then, to paraphrase Blake, they have become what they beheld.

In sum, films like Alien cannot legitimately be recommended as polemics against capitalism. They should instead be properly recognized as collective artistic derivatives of its depredations, peculiar signifiers of a primordial selfishness, a boundless narcissism that pervades the age and diminishes the spirit. They are deeply testamentary to those terrible fractures of ego-desire which Father Thomas Merton discerned as the most certain result of a "life centered on 'things,' on the grasping and manipulation of objects."¹⁵

With rare exceptions, cruel cinema's means of production and ideology are dictated by corporate parameters. At best, then, its texts constitute sullied jeremiads. They dimly apprehend the primordial selfishness infecting late twentieth-century capitalism, but can only recommend convenient escapist, individualistic solutions.¹⁶ At worst, they are signatory of its callous manipulations of our fellow creatures and our environment, which have brought us to the brink of universal ambiguity, destructiveness, and despair.