
Discursive Significance of the 1979 Film “Alien” by Ridley Scott

Ever since it was released to the movie theatres in 1979, the sci-fi film *Alien* (directed by Ridley Scott) has instantly attained the status of a “cult-movie” – the development that was followed by the film’s inclusion into the list of 100 greatest movies ever made. Even though film critics tend to provide different explanations as to the sheer popularity of Scott’s masterpiece, there can be very little doubt that *Alien* does deserve to have a cult following. There are a number of reasons as to why this appears to be the case. First, the film’s themes and motifs appeal to viewers on an unconscious level, which presupposes that *Alien* will continue to remain discursively relevant into the future. Second, there is a strongly defined humanist sounding to the film’s plotline, which means that there is an educational value to *Alien* as well. Third, the concerned movie promotes what can be deemed as the “post-feminist” outlook on women’s empowerment, consistent with the realities of the 21st century’s living. As Kavanaugh pointed out: “*Alien* operates as a feminist statement on a symbolic level that avoids both the trivializing, empiricist condemnation of men and the puritanical condemnation of sexuality and sexual attraction” (95). In order to understand the a range of potentialities in interpreting the film, this paper will assess the validity of all three suggestions at length while arguing that, despite the film’s affiliation with the sci-fi genre, it does resonate rather well with the ways of modernity. During the process, I will aim to outline the commonly overlooked ideological messages, conveyed by *Alien*.

“Uncanny” Themes/Motifs

As it was implied in the Introduction, the phenomenon of the *Alien* film’s popularity is reflective of the fact that its themes and motifs originate in the repressed workings of one’s unconscious psyche. To illustrate the validity of this suggestion, we can refer to the alien creature’s nightmarish appearance, which nevertheless has a clearly recognizable phallic quality to it. In this respect, Blackmore came up with the insightful observation: “Through grotesquely emphasized erectile images, the alien (in Scott’s film) insistently registers psychosexually as a threatening phallus: it unfolds itself from a seemingly inert mass into a towering menace” (213). This provides us with the important clue as to why *Alien* became the classic of the sci-fi genre – the film’s subject matter appeals to the primordial instincts in people. While exposed to it, viewers get to experience what Freud used to describe as the “sensation of uncanny”: “An uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (Woodward 63). In this regard, we can refer to the uncanny motifs of pregnancy, birth, death and phallic penetration, prominently featured in Scott’s film. These motifs trigger reactive responses in the limbic part of one’s brain, in charge of controlling the person’s instinctual drives. This is exactly the reason why there can be hardly any neutral/indifferent reactions to *Alien*, on the viewing audience’s part. Regardless of what may be one’s personal opinion of the film, he or she will still find it utterly memorable.

What also contributes towards strengthening the “uncanny” appeal of *Alien* are both the plot’s simplicity “the narrative premise of *Alien* is eminently simple: the monster attack” (Lev 32) and the fact that the film exploits the deep-seated fear of parasites in people. As the same author noted: “The alien creature in *Alien* does not merely kill humans, it uses them as hosts for a

process of reproduction” (Lev 32). Hence, an interesting peculiarity about *Alien* - even those viewers appalled by the film’s graphically violent scenes cannot help experiencing a stout desire to keep watching the movie. In its turn, this has to do with the earlier mentioned workings of the limbic part of the human brain – despite the fact that viewers are perfectly aware (consciously) that the alien monster seen in Scott’s film is anything but real, their primeval instincts tell them that this monstrous creature is perfectly real and that it may be hiding in the room where the film is being watched. After all, the mentioned “primeval” part of one’s brain cannot tell the difference between the factual reality and the cinematic one. When a person watches *Alien*, his or her unconscious psyche transcribes the on-screen action as such that conveys the message of “danger”. This helps to explain why, despite the fact that many viewers find *Alien* rather disturbing, they nevertheless remain strangely attracted to Scott’s movie – by continuing to follow the plot’s development, people learn more about the monster, which in turn is supposed to make it more likely for them to be able to survive the possible encounter with the one.

Apparently, while directing *Alien* Scott never ceased to be thoroughly aware of the psychological mechanics of how people perceive the surrounding reality. There is, however, even more to the film, with respect to its “uncanny” power – the fact that the movie’s main motifs correlate well with the survivalist anxieties in viewers. After all, despite its horrific appearance, the film’s alien monster is there to illustrate what the notion of “evolutionary perfection” stands for: “Ash (character) admires the Alien precisely as we would expect him to, because it is ‘unclouded by a conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality’” (225). Even though Ash is the film’s antagonist, his admiration of the parasitic monster does strike a chord with the viewers’ own latent wishes. After all, there is only one purpose to just about any form of organic life – replicating its genome. Within this context, the considerations of morality/ethics have no place, whatsoever. Hence, the film’s horror – as the plotline unravels, viewers get to realize that there is much more in common between the representatives of the *Homo Sapiens* species and the featured alien creature than they would be willing to admit. It is understood, of course, that this adds even further to the film’s “uncanny” sounding – something that clearly goes to the director’s credit.

Societal Humanism

It represents a commonplace occurrence for “cult-movies” to have a certain absurdist quality to them. For example, formally speaking the film *Star Wars* belongs to the sci-fi genre. However, it will make much more sense discussing the significance of this film’s foremost themes (love, betrayal, courage, loyalty, spirituality) within the discursive context of a typical Nordic saga. The film *Alien* accounts for yet another illustrative example, in this respect. The rationale behind this suggestion is as follows. One of the film’s main characteristics is that its settings bring to mind the notion of social withdrawal/alienation – all because most action in *Alien* takes place on board of the spaceship Nostromo, the confined internals of which resemble those of a submarine. As Lev aptly pointed out: “*Alien*... deals with a restricted space. The main set is the human spaceship, with a few minutes spent on an uninhabited planet and in the alien ship” (32). Because of it, one would be naturally tempted to assume that the director’s agenda was primarily concerned with ensuring the psychological plausibility of the relationships between the featured characters. Nevertheless, even though Scott did succeed in presenting the plot developments as being thoroughly realistic, in the psychological sense of this word, his directorial objective appears to have been ideologically motivated.

Given the film's subject matter, we can speculate that while working on *Alien*, Scott aimed for nothing short of exposing the unsustainability of Capitalism, as the form of sociopolitical governing. The reason for this is quite apparent. The film's plot only makes sense within the discursive framework of the Capitalist paradigm, which glorifies people's endowment with the sense of irrational greed (while referring to it as "entrepreneurial industriousness"), as something that enables the continuation of social, cultural, and scientific progress. However, as it can be inferred from *Alien*, Capitalism is doomed to prove counter-beneficial to humanity's well-being in the long run – all because its proponents refer to capital (money) as such that represents some thoroughly objective value. Consequently, this creates the objective preconditions for the Capitalist society to grow less and less appreciative of the value of human life. Hence, the significance of the episode in which Lt. Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) reads the Special Order 937, given to the ship's computer by the Company: "Priority one. Ensure return of organism for analysis. All other considerations secondary. Crew expendable" (*Alien* 01.13.50). Apparently, the director wanted this episode to serve as a powerful indictment of Capitalist "industriousness". In fact, he made a point in promoting the idea that the very workings of the Capitalist society encourage the rich and powerful to grow completely blinded by their greed for money – something that prevented the Company's officials from realizing that they will not be able to benefit a whole lot from bringing the alien monster to Earth by definition (the creature would destroy all other life on the planet). Therefore, despite having been produced in 1979, *Alien* can be the least referred to as thematically outdated. It is understood, of course, that this serves as yet another proof that Scott's film does deserve to be considered a cinematographic masterpiece.

Post-Feminism

Another indication of the film's sheer progressiveness is concerned with the way *Alien* treats the subject of gender interrelationship – something that prompts literary critics to refer to it as probably the first post-feminist movie (Nesbitt 21). Even though there is no universally accepted definition as to what "post-feminism" stands for, it will be appropriate to think of the concept as such that stands opposed to the classical feminist assumption that men and women happen to have rather incompatible agendas in life. Because of the subtleties of the film's plot, it will also be suitable to define "post-feminism" being reflective of the idea that women are fully capable of affiliating themselves with the traditionally "masculine" values (when the circumstances call for it), without having to become any less feminine. The mentioned character of Ellen Ripley exemplifies the actual connotations of this statement. After all, despite having been a fragile woman, Ripley never ceased emanating the authority of a natural-born leader – in the film she is shown capable of ordering around other crew members by doing as little as raising her eyebrow. Moreover, just about every of her decisions proved perfectly logical and circumstantially sound. And yet, after having assumed the responsibilities of a leader, Ripley did not exhibit even the slightest indication that she was deriving any emotional pleasure from having realized herself in the position to tell others what to do. In its turn, this is best explained in conjunction with the fact that being a female, she did not aspire for domination as something that has a value of its own (unlike what it is the case with most males).

This partially explicates why some authors make a point in referring to the concerned character in terms of a "feminist heroine": "The *Alien/s* films seemingly showcase a feminist heroine who follows the path of a feminine mythic journey... Ripley becomes a female warrior and engages in a mythic descent into feminine consciousness" (Mandziuk 156). However, there is nothing truly "mysterious" about the Ripley's ability to exercise authority over other characters in *Alien* –

something that directly relates to the earlier articulated claim that far from being a “feminist” (in the conventional sense of this word), she is, in fact, a “post-feminist”. The reason why Ripley ended up proving herself a very effective leader is that, unlike the rest of the crew members (including the ship’s Captain), she was capable of indulging in the systemic (cause-effect) type of reasoning, which many people continue to refer to as the exclusively “masculine virtue”. And, as it can be inferred from the film’s connotative context, such Ripley’s ability has been enacted by the fact that being a woman, she naturally tended to regard the ship’s crew as some sort of a spatially stable entity while being innately driven to “nurture” and “protect” it. Thus, *Alien* opposes both classical feminism, which claims that all men are intrinsically predisposed to oppress women, and male-chauvinism, the proponents of which continue to doubt women’s ability to rely on their sense of rationale while addressing life-challenges. This once again highlights the overall progressive sounding of the discussed movie – because of the film’s strongly defined “post-feminist” overtones, there can be only a few doubts that *Alien* does contain a number of analytical insights into the formation of one’s gender identity.

Final Thoughts

What has been said in the paper’s analytical part can be summarized as follows: The popularity of the 1979 film *Alien* derives out of the director’s decision to make a point in appealing to the consciously repressed instincts in viewers. Specifically, to the people’s deep-seated fear of the unknown - especially if the visually observed extrapolations of the latter are evocative of the phallic/snakelike shapes. Because such their fear has a strong unconscious quality to it, the film’s continual popularity/cult-status can be deemed as yet another proof that allegorically speaking, the representatives of the *Homo Sapiens* species are, in fact, nothing but “hairless apes” – something once again confirms the validity of the Darwinian theory of evolution. Even though *Alien* does exploit viewers’ endowment with a number of different primordial anxieties, the film’s overall message is concerned with the director’s intention to promote the idea that to be considered fully human, one must apply a continual effort in preventing these anxieties from taking control of his or her conscious domain. In particular, Scott’s film exposes the strongly anti-social essence of the corporate sector’s obsession with trying to gain more money/power, even if this can only be achieved at the expense of putting humanity at the risk of wholesale extinction.

In its turn, this endows *Alien* with the prominently defined anti-Capitalist sentiment. The director clearly wanted viewers to think of the “corporate sharks” as being no better than the alien monsters of the worst kind – the theme that will be explored even further in the film’s 1987 and 1992 sequels (*Aliens*, *Alien 3*). As opposed to what it is the case with the advocates of conventional feminism, *Alien* provides a biologically sound outlook on what women’s empowerment is all about, consistent with the basic evolutionary principles (which apply to people as much as they do to plants and animals) – hence, the unmistakably “post-feminist” sounding of many of the film’s themes and motifs. I believe that the deployed line of argumentation, in defense of the idea that the sci-fi film *Alien* does deserve to be listed amongst the world’s greatest cinematographic masterpieces, correlates perfectly well with the paper’s initial thesis. Apparently, this film will continue being considered a “cult-flick” into the future – provided, of course, that the West’s continual fixation on money, power, and domination (disguised as the “promotion of democracy”) does not result in triggering the nuclear WW3, when the moviemaking-related matters would cease being considered particularly relevant.

Alien. Directed by Ridley Scott, performance by Sigourney Weaver, Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.

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