CULTURE & POWER

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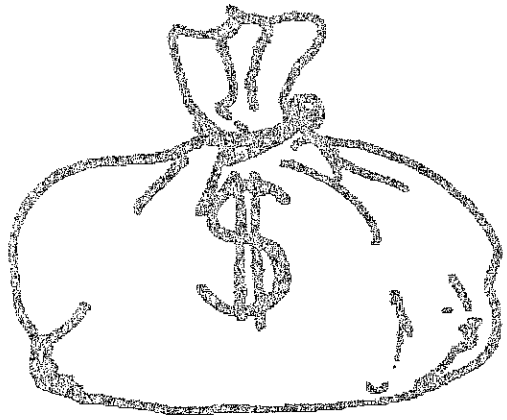

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CONTENTS

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MONSTROUS BUSINESS: THE *ALIEN* FILM SERIES

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Business and popular culture join hands in the very successful *Alien* film series, which comprises the original 1979 film and the sequels, *Aliens* (1986), *Alien3* (1992) and the forthcoming *Alien Resurrection*.[1] The series is important not only because *Alien* marks the transition towards a new period in the evolution of the representation of monstrosity on the screen, but also because this series is a most significant instance firstly, of the successful commercial exploitation of monstrosity in the multimedia narratives typical of the 1980s and 1990s, and, secondly, of the canonisation of the contemporary monster film. The series is also a fascinating case study of the way in which money interferes both in the freedom and the motivation of the artists working in films. When reading about how the films were made it seems almost a miracle that they exist at all.

The series has attracted a considerable amount of interest among scholars devoted to film and cultural studies. Yet, practically every academic publication on *Alien* deals with whether the protagonist, Ellen Ripley, is a truly feminist heroine and also with the allegedly misogynistic content of the series. Readings of the problematic gender of the monsters abound and so do psychoanalytical interpretations of Ripley's confrontation with the alien queen. Nevertheless, an issue as important as how the series has evolved thanks to its box office success has been neglected. In fact, there is one publication in book format dealing with this matter – John Flynn's *Alien Dissection* (1995) – yet this is aimed at the fans of the series and does not attempt to do anything but gather together so-far scattered pieces of information about the making of the films. It seems necessary, thus, to pave the way for a new approach in cultural studies which may mix information and interpretation.

Alien, the original film, is at first sight, a conventional monster film. / Scott's film is the heir of the paranoiac 1950s American films about ɛ outer space monsters, together with films that immediately preceded – such as Philip Kaufmann's 1978 remake of Don Siegel's 1956 classic *nvasion of the Body Snatchers* – or that followed it, such as John nter's 1982 remake of Christian Nyby's 1951 *The Thing*. *Alien* is not a remake, even though *It! The Terror from Outer Space* (1958) has been ɔned as its most immediate source. *Alien* aims, though, at remaking the tradition of the 1950s monster film, which kept many in business in wood. This was indeed the initial purpose of producers Gordon Carroll, Giler and Walter Hill. They intended to release a relatively cheap film (the t was only $9 million) capable of launching their new production ıny, Brandywine, by appealing to the postmodernist nostalgia for the old film and by offering attractive visual innovations geared to the demanding ɛr audiences. Critics such as Carol Clover have also found direct links ɛn Scott's film and the 1970s sub-genre of the slasher film, a horror film ɛnre best epitomised by John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). The slasher ıtter film centres on the survival of a woman who narrowly escapes the posed by a human monster that exterminates all around her. *Halloween*, ıt be noted, has entered the history of film business as one of the most ıble films ever made. Thus, the initial impulse for the *Alien* series was ɛd by the wish to imitate genres that had proved to be a good investment ɔt by the need to express any artistic impulse or to make any ideological

Despite the fact that *Alien* preceded *Blade Runner* in director Ridley s career and despite the popular and critical success of both films, they ngly occupy different positions in the recent history of the monster film. ıbly, *Blade Runner* is itself the heir of the change of direction in the uction of monstrosity started by *Alien*, especially because of the effort in both films in terms of production design, which is, ultimately, what the main difference between these films and the 1950s monster films. Yet has inspired a number of sequels and an ever increasing merchandising

phenomenon whereas *Blade Runner* has acquired the status of cult film especially because of its academic canonisation, as reflected in Judith Kerman's 1991 anthology, *Retrofitting Blade Runner*. *Blade Runner* can be said to be the intellectuals' favourite monster film; *Alien* the masses'. Arguably, the existence of sequels and of licensed products for merchandising place certain films in a different category, as cultural happenings of a very different nature from ordinary film releases and this is something cultural studies should tackle.

The key to the success of *Alien* was not the screenplay, obviously. Dan O'Bannon's very weak original script for *Alien* – seemingly plagiarised from A.E. van Vogt's short story "Black Destroyer", published in the pulp *Astounding Science-Fiction* in 1939 – was extensively re-written by the producers. Success came thanks to other factors than the predictable plot. These were: Scott's atmospheric direction, the extraordinary quality of the designs for the monster by Swiss artist H.R. Giger, a gloomy, Gothic production design that abandoned the clean look of other 1970s science-fiction films like *Star Wars* (1977) – made in the style of *2001* (1968) – and the heroine Ellen Ripley. The shifting of the heroic role from a man to a woman – the sturdy spaceship officer played by Sigourney Weaver – which was apparently an accidental decision, surprised the audience and ensured the success of *Alien* and that of the whole series. Without Ripley, the series cannot exist.

The threatening extraterrestrial simply called 'alien' is a creature aimed at horrifying as much as at fascinating. This original, stunning monster is very different from previous screen monsters because it was born of the marriage of high art and cinematic special effects. Giger, its designer, has often declared his admiration for Dalí's surrealism and Füssli's personal Gothic-Romantic style, though Francis Bacon's "Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion" triptych (1944) is the most direct inspiration behind the alien. The main challenge for Giger was that the alien is a shape-shifter, which meant that he had to create four very different versions of the creature. Part of the suspense of the film is based on this multiplicity of images: characters and audience never know what shape the monster will take next. Giger did not collaborate in the sequels, though other artists, such as Stan Winston in *Aliens*, developed his designs

as the idea was to attract new audiences by entering variations into the
f the monster. This, of course, has proved also a clever merchandising
for fans of the series are eager to collect toys and models that represent
ifferent alien monsters.

ıe ambiguous image of this protean creature has many different possible
s. Apparently, the main inspiration for the 'modus operandi' of the alien
Newton wasp, a species that uses the bodies of its prey as cocoons for
vae. The aliens are born from eggs but also reproduce themselves by
rally their male or female victims in order to insert a larva that grows in
ach of the victim, who is kept alive while s/he is used as a cocoon and
illed by the birth of the phallic baby alien, which gnaws its way out of
: body. The weapons they use to kill are their powerful claws and a kind
l vagina dentata that springs from a clearly phallic head to stab the
The aliens' obsession for reproduction is possibly a metaphor for
e anxieties that suggest an increasing dissociation in the minds of
orary men and women between sex and reproduction. The latter is seen
hing animal, even monstrous. The aliens do not discriminate between
l female victims, but the introduction of a parthenogenetic egg-laying
ı *Aliens* and Ripley's confrontation with this monster she calls 'bitch'
ɔ to the reading of the series as a misogynistic fantasy.[2] On the other
ɔ alien may also connote disease: interestingly, deadly viruses such as
hat causes malaria are also mutant shape-shifters with different phases
h. Also, despite its futuristic 'biomechanical' anatomy with its fusion
ic and inorganic elements, the claws and the reptilian tail of the alien
ll the image of the Devil as the apocalyptic Beast, a motif used in *Alien*

ien, *Aliens* and *Alien3*, have all been produced by Brandywine, a small
n company. Yet the films have been actually financed and distributed
Century Fox, the Hollywood studio also behind the other big monster
: 1990s, Chris Carter's television series *The X-Files*. For budget reasons,
gy has moved twice across the Atlantic. The first film was a medium-
ɔroduction made at Shepperton Studios in London, with a mixed crew

of mainly American and British artists headed by a British director. This 'sleeper' (a film of unexpected box-office success) was followed by a big-budget sequel, made in Hollywood by the American director James Cameron, himself a specialist in making expensive monster films, including *The Terminator* (1984), its sequel *The Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) and *The Abyss* (1989). For the third episode, which was a medium-budget film, the producers returned again to Britain, where the cost of making the film was lower, and hired a newcomer, American director David Fincher, who later made the highly acclaimed *Seven* (1995) in Hollywood. It is, thus, impossible to say which nationality the films are, especially if we take into account Giger's involvement with the design of the monster. As regards the appeal of the three films, Scott's is the best in artistic terms, while Cameron's is the most spectacular and the audience's favourite. *Alien3* was thoroughly disliked by American audiences who could not sympathise with the British-accented characters nor accept the bleak ending; the film, though, did better in Europe. The making of this film was beset by many problems, beginning with a script that went through six revisions. The film was born, plainly, out of greed, for both Brandywine and 20th Century Fox wanted to cash in on the monster again regardless of the content of the film. Nobody seemed to have a clear idea of the direction the film should take and there were so many disagreements as to how it should be made that it is a wonder it was ever released.

A consequence of these changes is that Ripley's personality has been pulled in different directions, with a certain disregard for coherence, though she has been certainly growing in protagonism. The accidental hero of the first film, a rather unsympathetic character who is little more than a narrative function generated by the presence of the monster, becomes in *Aliens* a reluctant female Rambo inspired by Cameron's collaboration in the writing of the first Rambo film, *First Blood* (1982). In *Aliens*, Ripley – no longer the survivor, the Final Girl, but the warrior – is the centre of a plot involving the decimation of a platoon of US marines by the monsters, which appear to be thousands, and the rescue of yet another female survivor – the child Newt – from the clutches of the awesome queen alien. In this all-female epic men play no role except making

ecisions and dying. Despite this, *Aliens* is the film that has inspired most attacks against the series. In *Alien3*, set in a planet used as a penal or highly dangerous male psychopaths, the apocalyptic confrontation Ripley, the monster and the Company is underlined by the issue of who nonster is: the alien, the woman, the men or the Company who employs wants to capture the monster. Ripley becomes here a suicidal, tired who can successfully fight the men and the monster but not the y that has been using her since the very first moment to secure the alien oweapons division.

tually, another factor contributing to the success of the series is the fact onfrontation between the alien monster and the new, reluctant female urns out to be a plot orchestrated by the shady Company, a gigantic ietary corporation. The true source of evil is not the monster, basically or that cannot help predating on other species, but the monstrous y which preys on its expendable workers in the pursuit of its goal: the ion of the monster as the ultimate biological weapon. This seems to ght the imagination of the audience, many of them, no doubt, unhappy mployees at the mercy of corporate business. The heroine Ripley, who it first in strict adherence to the Company's rules, is awakened to a new s of her position when she realises that her crew have been sacrificed terests of her employer. It is not clear whether Ripley reacts to this as an angered worker, an angered woman or, simply, a very scared ut her status as an officer forces her to assume a heroic role which has ously interpreted as feminist, humanist or anti-capitalist. Ripley is, thus, monster-slaying heroine but also a sort of accidental left-wing activist, ry little has been made of her resistance against the Company in terms tical ideology.

act, the relationship between Ripley and the Company is mirrored by en actress Sigourney Weaver and 20th Century Fox to a certain extent. who took up the role in the first film reluctantly, as she disliked genre now returned to the role, which has made her a somewhat limited film ree other occasions. She was nominated for the Oscar as best actress

for *Aliens*, but it was her decision to have Ripley killed in *Alien3*, a film she co-produced, so as not to be typecast for ever in the role. However, money and, one can imagine, much pressure from Fox, have convinced Weaver to play Ripley again in *Alien Resurrection,* where her character is reborn thanks to cloning. No wonder then that, in order to explain why the series goes on despite the failure of *Alien3*, John Flynn says that "much like the mythical, malevolent 'Company' of the series, some evidence does suggest that 20th Century Fox [is] motivated more by profit margins than creative integrity" (1995:77). This is something the audiences resent but not to the point of identifying with Ripley's position in the series.

Sigourney Weaver herself has recently declared that women needn't kill alien monsters on the screen to prove that they are strong heroines. For her, most women are currently playing the role of the strong heroine in their daily lives, combining their jobs with their family life and the development of their own personalities (Trashorras, 1996:116). Her Ripley, though, paved the way for heroines such as Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* (1984) and Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and, indeed, Dana Scully of *The X-Files*, all of them ordinary women turned into extraordinary heroines by strange circumstances. Ordinary women playing the role of the strong heroine in daily life are still conspicuously missing on the screen, though so are ordinary men in this Hollywood of action films.

As I have noted, Ellen Ripley is not a especially popular character among feminist critics. Carol Clover, who classes Ripley together with the Final Girls, those who survive in slasher films, denies that Ripley is a feminist evolution of the traditional heroine of horror. Clover argues that Ripley is in fact "a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking. She is simply an agreed-upon fiction and the male viewer's use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies an act of perhaps timeless dishonesty" (1989:53). On her side, Judith Newton grants that Ripley is a "fine and thrilling hero" – not heroine. Yet Newton sees the main snag in Ripley's femininity and not in her alleged gynandry: "impulsive, nurturing, and sexually desirable," Newton writes, "she is not so threatening to men after all" (1990:87), as if Ripley's mission were

:n and not extraterrestrial monsters. In contrast, James Kavanagh, sees th of the first alien "the triumphant rebirth of humanism, disguised as progressive, and justifying feminism" (1990:73). Kavanagh adds that nobilises all the resources of the courageous woman "to resist and obliterate the voracious phallic monster forced on her [...] by the will propriately absent Father (the Company)" (1990:77). In his view, ıg the fact that the relations between the men and the women of the marked by rank in the Company's hierarchy and not by gender, "the ıe seen as almost postfeminist" (1990:77). Obviously, neither Clover nagh are representatives of respectively female and male audiences; nen might agree with Kavanagh's suggestion that Ripley is a credible ist heroine, whereas many men may have felt like Newton that Ripley inine to be actually different from any other heroine of horror fiction. ignificant is that the defence of Ripley as a feminist heroine comes n, who has apparently failed to see that Ripley is, in Clover's words, rogate. The confusion of gender roles is extreme in Vivian Sobchack's : that unlike Princess Leia of *Star Wars*, who wears a proper white, lress, Ripley wears "the same fatigues as the community of astronauts he is – from the beginning – a part" (1990:106). Leia's virginal dress n to be in glaring contradiction with her active political role, yet, for Ripley's androgynous working clothes are more objectionable as they she is just a Company employee and not a woman above all. However, none of the psychotic male inmates of the penitentiary colony where lands fails to notice the conspicuous signs of her femininity, despite s and her shaven head. So, why is Ripley popular? Male fantasy or eroine there is, simply, no one like her; her charisma is as exceptional ı's, which may well be a misogynistic comment. Ripley is an anomaly ıclear whether she is a positive or a negative anomaly but she is, above ıcter capable of attracting filmgoers, and this is the only ideology 20th ox is interested in.

volume of business generated by the *Alien* trilogy is, simply, amazing. ı explains that "learning much from the promotional campaign for Star

Wars, 20th Century Fox had also licensed a number of companies to produce merchandise and promotional items for Alien" (1995:42) This included a novelization of the screenplay by Alan Dean Foster through Warner Books, a movie book by Avon Books, a comic book adaptation, a trade paperback design book, a calendar and *Giger's Alien*, a coffee table art book documenting his creation of the designs and including a juicy on-set diary. Other licensed items were a souvenir programme, poster magazines and posters, custom-design masks and Halloween costumes, T-shirts, bubble-gum cards, mobiles, a model kit of the monster, jigsaw puzzles, pins, buttons, and children's pyjamas. "Some of the products", Flynn adds, "did very well, but most of them ended up being remaindered". It is important to note that video-tape and laserdisc version are also part of the merchandising as the different releases include extra material never previously seen. Thus, the laserdisc version of *Alien* includes an interview with Scott and sections on pre-production and production, while there is an *Aliens* extended version with twenty-two minutes of extra footage. Fox knows that fans will buy them all.

20th Century Fox was less enthusiastic over *Aliens* and the market was not flooded as previously with licensed products. Still, a novelization was published by Warner Books. In 1992, coinciding with the release of *Alien3*, Halcyon, a Britain-based model company, released several original model kits inspired by the two previous sequels, *Alien* and *Aliens*. Merchandise for *Alien3* was practically non-existent, except for the novelization and the Dark Horse comic adaptation. In 1993, Kenner Products began selling action figures based on the characters in the series which also included new designs for the aliens. As John Flynn notes, from 1992 onwards, many unlicensed Japanese products appeared, making the merchandising of *Alien* products far more successful today than in its initial release. It is easy to see, thus, that there is a gap between the films release and the merchandising of licensed products, which means that other factors must be at work that contribute to the standing popularity of the series, despite the failure of *Alien3*, the main factor being the work of the Oregon publishing house Dark Horse.

Roger Sabin reports that Dark Horse Comics struck several deals with

tury Fox to turn *The Terminator*, *Predator* and *Aliens*, into ongoing
This is known as reverse licensing, as the film precedes the printed
n. Mike Richardson, the director and founder of Dark Horse, saw the
independent stories that followed from the films but needn't be copies
adaptations. "What is so clever about this arrangement", Sabin notes,
allows for the possibility that plots generated in the comics might then
n future films" (1993:288), though, so far, this has not happened.
ıe comic, was first published in 1988, while *Predator*, the comic,
in 1989. Dark Horse began publishing new stories about the aliens in
ıer of 1988, just after releasing the film's comic adaptation; these,
still being produced, are often much superior in interest and originality
enplays offered to Fox for new sequels. In 1990 Dark Horse launched
sful *Alien vs. Predator* series, which is a likely candidate for a future
tation. It must be noted that *Predator*, another monster-from-outer-
, made in 1987 starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and with designs by
ton, followed in the wake of the success of *Aliens*. Winston himself,
remembered, designed the monsters for *Aliens*. The link came through
ıous scene in which an alien skull appears among the hunting trophies
e predators, a race of warrior-hunters and not mere survivors like the
is suggested a hidden story in which the aliens might be the rivals or
f the predators and the interest shown by fans of both films gave rise
nic series. In 1992 Dark Horse became international and started
a series of novelizations of both the *Aliens* and the *Aliens vs.*
omic series. This is how the image of the monster is kept alive while
eagerly wait for a new sequel.

le the new comics and new novels await their transfer onto the screen
ıtion of the *Alien* monster in the multimedia narrative material has
to video-games, role-game cards and to less conventional products.
ıasts among its attractions an 'Alien Experience' to be enjoyed at the
, in which the fans of the trilogy are treated to the experience of being
the monster in truly Gothic fashion through dimly lit corridors. More
and paradoxical is the merchandising of the horrific alien as a toy,

especially when the three films of the series are rated 18. In Britain, the Boots Christmas 1994 catalogue featured an 'Alien Bubble Bath' (a reproduction of the monster) in its section of toiletries for children, while the Argos Catalogue for the same period included an assortment of alien toys, all of them suitable for six-year-olds. Curiously enough, in Spain exactly the same toys are available to four-year-olds. It cannot be said that this is a new phenomenon, as sales of models of popular monsters started as early as the 1960s; the difference is marked now by the astonishing range of products the alien is selling. Films like these should be seen, therefore, as part of a much larger multimedia structure still insufficiently researched.

In summary, all the features typical of the intensive commercialisation of monstrosity in multimedia entertainment converge in the *Alien* series. They are complemented by the internationalisation of the monster film: the monster belongs to as many cultures as have access to the films (often dubbed) and to their merchandising. The monster becomes a myth because it has become a commodity and, conversely, it is turned into a commodity because its badly understood mythical, universal appeal guarantees the profits derived from the merchandising. The commercial success of the *Alien* series has not affected its canonisation in film studies, though business has been ignored in favour of an analysis of gender roles in the series. The rise of the alien monster to cultural 'respectability' is proved not only by the three Oscars and seven nominations gathered by the series, but also by the many academic papers devoted to the trilogy, especially to the figure of Ripley. Fans who regard the films as cult films, critics who discuss the feminist basis of Ripley's role as monster slayer, the children who play with the toys and those who enjoy the thrill of being chased by the Trocadero Alien are all part of the same phenomenon: the alliance of business and popular culture. Ripley's criticism of the Company's ruthless business practice illuminates our task, for, just like her, we live in the age of multinational capitalism. Beyond it, there is not much, if anything at all, and this is something that for good or for bad we cannot forget in cultural studies.

NOTES

ıer was written in 1997 before the release of *Alien Resurrection*. It does not 'efore, the whole *Alien* series.

h I have no room to comment on this aspect here, in *Alien Resurrection* the tic content seems to come to the foreground with this new, superhuman .o is a hybrid of the original Ripley and the alien monster. Woman and ıally merge. The other woman in the film is a humanoid robot.

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CHERRÍE MORAGA'S CRITICISM OF AGRIBUSINESS IN *HEROES AND SAINTS*: A FEMINIST REVISION OF "TEATRO CAMPESINO"

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> Land becomes the common ground for radical action. But land is more than the rocks and trees, the animal and plant life that make up the territory of Aztlán or Navajo Nation or Maya Mesoamerica. For immigrant and native alike, land is also the factories where we live. For women, lesbians and gay men, land is that physical mass called our bodies. Throughout las Américas, all these "lands" remain under occupation by an Anglocentric, patriarchal, imperialist United States. (Moraga, 1993:173)

The above excerpt from Cherríe Moraga's essay "Queer Aztlán" clearly exemplifies this writer's particular nationalist conception of space. Following the indigenist "tactical nationalism"[1] of the Chicano movement, she invokes the "occupied" land of the Aztecs and other native peoples of America. With the notion of Aztlán, the name the Aztecs gave to the lands of what today is the U.S. Southwest, the *Chicanismo* of the late 1960's envisioned a mythical space in order to affirm a sense of peoplehood and communal unity, as well as to confront the racial and social oppression of Mexicans and Chicanos. But Moraga also speaks of the different meanings land acquires depending on one's sexuality and one's social position. For Moraga space is always tied up to gender, race, economic and social relations. A space may metaphorically allude to one's collective identity as a people, but it may also refer to one's repressed sexuality, as well as to the domestic, social and labor conditions under which one lives. Thus, this writer proposes a political, ideological way of thinking about space or place, according to which it does not become a static geographical entity, but a mobile one when we subject it, in Fredric Jameson's words, to a "cognitive mapping" (353). This mapping establishes a direct relationship between the place individuals inhabit and the power relations that affect them directly. The