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Cinema and Genre

Final Response Paper

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5. Alien and Aliens: Women Roles & Feminism

The heroic roles of movie characters that have been created over the past 40 years in the science fiction genre have changed significantly. Most of the lead heroes who showed such characteristics as intelligence, courage and leadership have primarily been the male gender whether it came to the characters played by Gary Cooper or Gregory Peck. The female protagonists within the context of a storyline have made a gigantic leap from such films like Fred Wilcox's *Forbidden Planet* to the films of today. Most of the female characteristics that were found in the early science fiction story usually fulfilled the roles of the damsel in distress, the femme fetal or the romantic love interest for the male lead of the story. Recent feminist writers challenged that clique most famously with such films as Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* and the iconic character of Clarice Starling, which proved that females didn't need a male love interest and could be just as comfortable or even more effective in taking the lead action role on their own instead of a male.

When Mary Shelley began writing her infamous novel *Frankenstein* which was a mixture of science-fiction, horror and romance, the sequel *Bride of Frankenstein* became something even grander, as the newly created female character didn't simply become a mate for the original

monster but a unique and individual character on her own, which breathed new life within the horror franchise. *Bride of Frankenstein* also proved that female characters were not only essential in telling a good story, but they could add even more depth to an already adored lead character. “Feminist writers rework or redeploy generic conventions in ways which foreground their normative operation, whilst also enacting a different, feminist, discourse” (Creed, 215). The two films I will discuss that explore the importance of the women roles in science fiction films are Ridley Scott’s and James Cameron’s highly acclaimed science fiction films *Alien* and *Aliens*.

The gender of the female and their feministic agendas and have always been a repressed fear within the male psyche and took many different shapes and forms over the decades especially within the genre of science fiction, which was a genre whose audience were mostly made up of males. Many film artists within the genre of science fiction explored the sexual Freudian themes of birth and death of the female and of the repressed fears of our own mothers usually containing sadistic agendas of their own; if they have the power to give you life, they also have the power to end it. Alfred Hitchcock has been known to create these Freudian like themes within the context of his stories, with many of them usually taking the shape of several psychopathic mothers and the men who were raised by them; most famously with his classic horror film *Psycho*. “The science fiction horror film, is using the body of a woman not only to explore these possibilities in a literal sense, but also as a metaphor for the uncertainty of the future...particularly the alien that impregnates woman, is also one of an uncertain future. (Creed, 215).

The *Alien* franchise, most importantly *Alien* and *Aliens* explored the themes of women’s sexuality and feminism throughout its entire series and created one of the greatest science fiction heroines in all of film history, Lieutenant Ellen Ripley played flawlessly by actress Sigourney

Weaver. The iconic character of Ellen Ripley not only became one of the great woman characters within the science fiction genre but is one of the few characters within that genre where the actress was nominated for a best actress Academy Award Oscar. Barbara Creed points out in the readings of *Monstrous Feminine* the sexual female imagery which is contained within the visuals of the first two *Alien* movies, which include the frightening themes of repression, claustrophobia and organic reproducing. H.R. Giger was one of the main art designers of the first *Alien*, and his visuals that he designed added an unforgettable amount psychological fear to the story. For instance, the hole that Kane discovers in the first *Alien* film looks very much like a toothed vaginal opening, the face hugger attaching itself to Kane can be seen as a horrific form of date rape, the spaceship that is discovered by the crewmembers is shaped like a horseshoe which suggests the spreading of two female legs, and the insides of the ship seem to look like the womb of a woman's vagina which are littered full of eggs (Creed 130).

And yet the film and its themes go beyond simple sexual overtones and also explore the complex character growth of Lieutenant Ellen Ripley who inhabits a capitalist work force, (whose character was originally written for a man) who has to assume a respect and authority to her working class comrades who are made up mostly of men (Newton, 82). In the beginning of Ridley Scott's *Alien*, Ripley starts off only as a supporting character within a large cast of crew members of the mining ship *Nostromo*, who are suddenly, awoken from hyper sleep during their journey back home to Earth. After being sent orders by their ship's head computer 'Mother' to investigate a planet that might or might not have an intelligent origin, one of their crew member's Kane is returned to the ship with some form of parasite attached to his face. Ripley acting cold and aloof decides to follow quarantine procedure and doesn't allow her crew member's back onboard with Kane. Acting upon the improper orders from Dallas, Ash violates

the quarantine protocol by opening the airlock, and allowing the exploratory team aboard the ship with Kane. There is a slight form of irony in the first half of *Alien* in that the character of Ripley seems to be more interested in following government protocols than saving the life of her fellow companions. Unlike Ash who seems more humane and understanding to their fellow crew members, the story takes an ironic twist later in the film when it is discovered that Ash is not only hiding a secret and devious agenda, but is not even human at all.

“Indeed, at first viewing one tends to sympathize with Ash, his anxiety while monitoring the activities of the rescue team seems symptomatic of genuine concern; he takes a chance, makes the seemingly human, spontaneous gesture in opening the airlock hatch; and he seems genuinely hounded by Ripley then she complains about his acting inconsistently with his responsibilities as a science officer” (Creed, 75).

When Kane eventually gives birth to an Alien life form during the infamous dinner sequence, you can see slight hints of Ripley’s heroism and leadership start to seep through the story as she strives to take command of the ship. There are also touches of sexual jealousy and workforce competitiveness between ranks of the crew, which was a theme that was alluded to earlier between Ripley and Ash and Parker and Brent. The tension between Dallas and Ripley is quite obvious later in the film, as Dallas on multiple occasions ignores Ripley’s ideas and suggestions and even turns down her willingness to participate in going in the ventilation shafts, in which he participates in doing instead. After Brett and Dallas’s death, that is the moment when Ripley decides to take full command of the crew, and follows Lambert’s advice on abandoning the Nostromo ship and escaping by using the shuttles, in hope that a deep salvage team will eventually find them.

The film ultimately projects Ripley as the alone surviving hero, as her authority, strength and intelligence outdoes even Dallas who audiences probably thought was the film's main hero near the first half of the film. Within time Ripley's bravery and courage is depicted much more clearly throughout the rest of the story. Ripley's most feministic moments in the film which greatly expose her female characteristics are towards the concluding scenes of the story. One of them is at the final conclusion of the film with her being the last survivor left after destroying the *Nostromo* and successfully escaping. Believing the alien is now dead she begins to sexily undress in front of the camera, with the audience fully prepared knowing the alien is in the escape pod with her.

The other scenes (and the parts in the film that I find quite preposterous) involve Ripley and Jonesy the cat. The scenes of her searching for Jonesy and caressing her are the beginnings of the audience not only developing empathy for her character, but they realize that the character of Ripley does have a sort of habitual humanist affection for another living creature and cares for its safety. This scene of her being concerned for a cat is also a completely different shift with her character, as the woman who earlier would have let her companions die outside by not opening the airlock, is now risking her life for an animal. "The image of the cat functions in the same way; it signifies an acceptable, and in this context a reassuring, fetish object for the normal woman. Thus, Ripley holds the cat to her, stroking it as if it were her 'baby', her 'little one' (Creed, 140).

In James Cameron's action sequel *Aliens*, Ellen Ripley is given not only much more development with her character, but more deeper mothering characteristics, along with an expansion on her leadership qualities. After Ripley is rescued and revived after drifting for 57 years in stasis, she learns that LV-426 which was the planet where her crew first encountered the

original Alien is now home to a terraforming colony. She is later asked to revisit the planet with a unit of space marines because the crew lost contact with the colony on LV-426. After reluctantly agreeing as a way to face her traumatic nightmares, she along with the space marines discover when arriving that most of the colonists are dead and have now been replaced by aliens.

Ripley's character takes a profound and dramatic turn when the marines find a traumatized young girl named Newt. Not only does Ripley immediately find a connection with this young girl because of their similar traumatized history with the alien, but Ripley looks to young Newt as a daughter like figure. This mothering relationship that develops between Ripley and Newt enriches Ripley's feministic qualities, without losing any of her tough courageous leadership skills in the process. In a lot of ways the way Ripley takes care of Newt and watches over her during most of the film is very similar to the way she protected and watched over the cat Jonsey in the first film. That comparison especially becomes reminiscent when Ripley risks her life near the end of the film and decides to go back into the processing station to rescue Newt, similar to her risking her life when saving Jonsey.

In the director's cut of *Aliens* there is a much more detailed back-story on the character of Ripley which mentions that she once had a daughter that was around Newt's age who unfortunately passed away while Ripley was drifting through space within those years between the first *Alien* film. This tragic loss between a mother and child gives Ripley a much deeper drive on why she feels the need to save young Newt, because in many ways it makes up for her losing her own daughter. What makes *Aliens* such a worthy sequel was not only the sudden change of genre which was from horror to action but the creation of a completed life cycle for the alien creature (for example: egg=face hugger=Queen=egg). The creation of the Queen Alien was an extraordinary achievement which not only added an new found terror that wasn't included in the

original film, but gave the character of Ripley an interesting foe to face off with. The Queen was also an interesting feministic contrast to Ripley, because here were two mothers protecting their off-spring which also enriched the themes of motherhood and of the female protecting her young.

Early on female roles within the male dominated genre of science fiction were more an ideology on the insecurities and fears of men's sexuality within society. Earlier on most women characters that were written for a science fiction story were usually one dimensional over exaggerated sexual objects that reflected most men's desires and fantasies. Female roles were also made to create a form of tension and friction between the male gender, and cause them to lose focus on their major objectives within the context of the story, because of men's biological urges. Ridley Scott created an iconic character with Lieutenant Ellen Ripley and James Cameron took her character to a much deeper level. (James Cameron did it again with the first two *Terminator* films with the invention of another strong, courageous female with the creation of Sarah Connor.) Ellen Ripley was not only one of the first women character's that took aggressive control over a male dominated genre, but also accomplished it without losing any of her feministic qualities. Her character is loved not only within the science fiction community but within the film community as well, as audiences couldn't get enough of Ripley which is why her character spawned two more unneeded sequels within the franchise.

Work Cited

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