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Bio-Mechanicalism and Alien: How Do We Make Meaning of Our Fear?

The fear of the ‘other’ is an ancient fear that precedes written history and will last as long as humankind does. Throughout our time on earth, this terror has taken countless forms in stories and recorded media, and each manifestation of external horror also reflects a portion of our inward dread. Analysis of the bio-mechanical elements of Ridley Scott's *Alien* allow us to gain a stronger grasp on what we fear, as well as why we fear it.

Ironically, the titular alien was ‘alien’ compared to other conceptualisations of extraterrestrial life at the time. Technologically superior space-dwellers dominated the media, like those seen in *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and those various iterations of pre-space probe Martians promoted by stories like *War of the Worlds*. Common tropes had them invading Earth or combatting the technologically-inferior humans. Examining these tropes often points to humankind's subjugation of the Earth, with these extraterrestrials being to us as we are to cows. In Ridley Scott's film, however, the alien expresses roughly animalistic intelligence in seeking to kill and reproduce exclusively. It evokes imagery of a hungry animal, with saliva and drool being a common feature, especially in foreshadowing. One of the most striking elements of the alien's design is its torso. It has ribbed, tube-like extensions that conjure images of vacuum tubes and pneumatics. Similarly mechanical features, such as the chain-like tail, sleek head, and rigid back advocate this bio-mechanical interpretation. I propose that the intersection of biology and mechanics is a doubly-alien concept in this movie. The sterility of the machine and the lack of

humanity found in computers converge with the instinctual hunting of a monstrous animal, which further distances it from the human imagination. The very concept of an ‘alien’ is intended to invoke the unknown, referring to something foreign. By incorporating elements from both foreign biology and machinery, the alien represents the *complete* unknown, with no similar frame of reference, as well as an assured lack of negotiability.

Another element of bio-mechanical horror in the film is the only synthetic human onboard, Ash. As the onboard doctor, Ash masterminds the acquisition of the alien in the first place as a secret confederate to the corporation attempting to obtain a sample. The main character, Ripley, becomes aware of his instructions and is attacked by Ash soon after. The android is decapitated with a flood of opaque white fluid, like glue. The crew later reactivates his head for interrogation. Aside from the apparent fusion of his human form with robotics, Ash also strongly conveys ‘alien’ signs. His ‘blood’ represents one source of this, drawing a parallel to the alien’s uncanny acid blood. They literally do not ‘bleed the same’ as the humans. Furthermore, the reanimation of his head strips away the illusion of his humanity, with flesh coloured wires soaked in fluid being reminiscent of tentacles. His actions evoke the most fear, in that he’s *not* faulty. Ash embodies the fear of the emotionless usurping robot of human creation.

Often, the setting advances the atmosphere of horror. In *Alien*, this is a particularly salient element of the horror, onboard the *Nostramo*. Another implementation of artificial intelligence, the ship is inhabited by a sapient computer called ‘Mother’. Similar to Ash, Mother has a directive unknown to the crew, assigned to it by the Weyland-Yutani corporation. The ship’s computer opposes the crew, and specifically Ripley, to preserve the alien. Where Ash portrays the charade of a person, Mother masquerades as a machine. Externally, the *Nostramo* shares many of the traits commonly associated with spacecraft in science fiction, a grey hull, the

presence of advanced life-preservation devices, and some sort of faster-than-light navigation. Mother, to both the audience and the crew, represents the ‘friendly’ machine. Seemingly clear intentions and transparency in its artificial nature present Mother as innocuous and helpful until Ash betrays Ripley. What follows is Mother acting against the crew, sabotaging their attempts to escape or stop the onboard threat. The disconnect between the positive and caring connotation Mother’s name and design preys on the fear of disobedient machines. Technology is nature subjugated, and Mother’s actions reflect the potentiality of a machine usurping a human. In particular, there is an inherent knowledge of a machine’s superiority to humans that is realised in this.

These manifestations of bio-mechanical horror reflect primal fears of the unknown, the uncontrollable, and the inhuman. *Alien* portrays the intersection of the biological and synthetic in various forms, but the technologies and organic components were selected with intention. As an audience, we gain a fear of *humanity*, and our development of technology. Rather than extraterrestrial technology overwhelming us, *Alien* asks the audience to imagine a nebulous and untrustworthy company with complete control over the otherwise uncontrollable. The desire to contain the alien represents the evolution of this ambition to innovate and study, regardless of the sacrifices. Ultimately, as well as curiously, we are presented with a plethora of inhuman horrors, yet come out with an understanding that they can arise from our fear of our own development.

Works Cited

Scott, Ridley, dir. *Alien*. 1979; Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2014. DVD.