Meanings of Ripley

Meanings of Ripley:
The *Alien* Quadrilogy and Gender

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INTRODUCTION

ELIZABETH GRAHAM

There is no doubt that the *Alien Quadrilogy* has received considerable popular and academic attention over the past thirty years. Much of this attention is perhaps due to the belief that it signalled a rebirth of science fiction and horror films. The films mark a course alteration away from the collapse into self-parodies originating with the 1950s invasion films. Much of the literature concentrating on the *Alien* films has been devoted to interpretations of the films, individually or collectively, or the aliens and what they represent. The films have been described as classic westerns in space having clear delineations between the heroes and the villains. They have also been interpreted as social commentaries on war, colonialism, AIDS, and other socially charged issues of the mid to late twentieth century. Mullhall argues that the significant attention the films have received is a consequence of the many issues explored in the films themselves:

> these movies are preoccupied, even obsessed, with a variety of interrelated anxieties about human identity—about the troubled and troubling question of individual integrity and its relation to the body, sexual difference and nature. (2002, 1)

As the central human character in the films, Ellen Ripley has received considerable attention and has become an iconic figure in the science fiction community as well as academic circles. Due to the longevity of her iconic status, many have posed the question, directly or indirectly, across the kitchen table, and in popular and academic publications, what is the Meaning of Ripley?

Ripley has come to represent many things to many people. Her complexity across four films has allowed for varied and contradictory interpretations of what she and the films represent. As a woman she was both a challenge to the established androcentric genre of science fiction/horror and also to established patriarchal societal norms regarding gender. At the same time, however, she can also be read as a female

character who reinforced gender expectations. She has been discussed as a feminist hero, a substitute for the Old West male hero, a patriarchal mother, a monster, and a Final Girl, to mention only a few interpretations. Given these variations, it is interesting that so many individuals writing about the *Alien* films, and Ripley in particular, discuss *the* meaning of a film or scene, *the* intentions of the writer or director, *the* impressions left *upon* the audience as if audience members are blank receivers with no worldview or control over their thoughts (see Williams 2006). This underlying assumption that there is some objective reality in relation to a science fiction/action/horror film is quite interesting to say the least. My point is that it is unusual to find in the literature dealing with these films any recognition that the meanings derived from a film are the result of a multitude of factors interacting with each other in a given social context.

Within the Interactionist Traditions of Sociology, individuals are viewed as simultaneously products and producers of the society in which they live. We are products created from the totality of our lived experiences. We are producers of the social world in that our conformity to established social patterns maintains the status quo, and changes in our behaviours can disrupt the status quo, ultimately resulting in social change. To understand the relationship between individual and the social context, and how these two interact in society, aspects of C. Wright Mills' work and Blumer's thoughts on the role of films in this relationship are useful to consider.

In his now classic piece, "The Promise," Mills explains:

> By the fact of his [her] living [s]he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as [s]he is made by society and by its historical push and shove. (1993, 167)

He argues that an understanding of this relationship is essential for any inquiry intended to explore who we are or how we see the world in which we live.

While it may initially seem inappropriate to rely on a work as dated as Herbert Blumer's 1933 book, *Movies and Conduct*, his insights remain valuable, and unfortunately

> Hollywood film has been neither the subject of sustained analysis nor the center of an accumulating tradition of scholarship [in sociology]…. Apart from a handful of sociologists working within the postmodernist rump of symbolic interactionist groups [a group that neither I nor this book represent]… the fictional nature of film and literature continues to place these products of human creativity and social organizations on a terrain

> that is beyond the range of routine sociological concern. (Dowd 1999, 325-326)

In addition, Blumer's primary concern with the influence of film on the individuals seems particularly relevant to the underlying assumption of this collection that in general the social context in which films, as with all products, are created and observed or interpreted is worthy of attention in any attempt to understand the meanings of the films.

As part of that endeavour to understand the influence of film, he necessarily needed to explore why different individuals can be influenced differently by the same film. He claims,

> There is a wide variety in what people may select out of a picture. Its influence, consequently, is dependent not solely upon its content but also upon the sensitivity and disposition of the observer. (1970 [1933], 179-180)

He elaborates by stating that these differences among individuals are more than consequences of sex or age, although these are important; "cultural background and personal character" and "the interests of one's group" also need to be considered.

> The implication is that if one is to foretell the effects of a motion picture one must know, in general, something of the interests and experience of those to whom the picture will be shown. (191)

In general, Blumer's point is not inconsistent with that found in recent feminist and film criticism literature dealing with intersectionality—multiple aspects of individuals and the contexts in which they exist need to be considered in order to reach a fuller, more complete understanding of what is happening. With a primary focus on oppression and inequality, intersectionality calls our attention to the interconnections of gender, race/ethnicity, social class,[1] and there is no doubt that such an approach would be worthwhile in an examination of Ripley. The various interpretations of her presented in this collection imply the need for considering the complexities discussed in that literature. That one character can be understood in so many seemingly diverse ways indicates not just the complexity of the character in terms of the intersections among gender, race, class, but also the complexity of the audiences as they engage

[1] Among the other factors considered in discussions involving intersectionality are sex, sexuality, and nationality.

with such a character. However, as Jennings points out, by exclusively favouring such plural positions

> there are dangers involved for the future of political organizations and critical arguments against oppressions that still face us, both individually and collectively. (1995, 193-4)

If such pluralistic approaches are not used in conjunction with approaches concentrating on these factors individually, there is the potential of destroying any sense of collectivity among individuals who have in common experiences of oppression and subjugation tied to one of these factors. Having no sense of shared experiences with others effectively works to discourage any type of action that could challenge structural inequality.

In addition, a number of the contributions to this collection do not have only issues of oppression as their concern. They also explore the ways in which the fictional Ellen Ripley is able to move beyond or overcome the oppressive elements that she encounters in her worlds.

This collection does not explore the "cultural background and personal character" of the contributors. Nonetheless, taking up Blumer's comment about the audience members, it is worth noting that many of the differences among these contributors, discussed below, are part of the collection's strength because they illustrate the relationship between the individual and society and how elements of uniqueness for each individual allow us to exist in similar social contexts, observe the same things, and still come to very different conclusions about meanings.

As most readers are aware, Ellen Ripley first appeared in *Alien* in 1979 and last appeared in 1997 in *Alien Resurrection*. Following the logic of C. Wright Mills, to attempt understandings of her as a social artifact produced by individuals, as well as others' interpretations of her requires that the social context leading up to and during her presence in society be understood in conjunction with at least some understanding of those doing the interpreting.

There is no doubt that prior to and during the time period referred to here questions about gender were being discussed in society. In fact, *scientific* discussions about the connection between biology and gender have a very long history. In the early 1900s, the belief in male intellectual superiority was advocated by individuals such as Cattell and Thorndike. Fausto-Sterling claims that such views

> were so congenial to the economic and political establishment of the period that rational, scientific challenges to their work were studiously ignored. (1985, 17-18)

Interestingly, while this view seemed to dissipate in the late 1930s, its rebirth, with no new facts, came about not long before the release of *Alien* in 1979. In fact, just one year before the film was released, Edwin Wilson wrote:

> It pays males to be aggressive, hasty, fickle and undiscriminating. In theory it is more profitable for females to be coy, to hold back until they can identify the male with the best genes…. Human beings obey this biological principle. (in Fausto-Sterling 1985, 156)

While individuals like Wilson, supporting the patriarchal status quo, argued the biological imperative of masculine and feminine characteristics or claimed male superiority, others, like Simone de Beavoir, attempted to dismantle such biological determinism, and still others such as Mary Daly and Adrinne Rich attempted to subvert that argument, attacking patriarchy sometimes in favour of separatism. A vast array of gender inequalities in Western societies were debated—everything from a woman's right to vote, to accessible birth control, to women holding positions of authority over men, to sexual assault, and much more. Responses and participation in the ongoing debates differed in a variety of ways at the individual and societal levels, in political and academic arenas. As time passed, more detailed and diverse positions regarding the gender questions were put forward reflecting the interdependent relationship between biography and history discussed by Mills and the variability inherent in that relationship—individual biographies brought into the discussion about gender offered varied interpretations, insights, and queries.

Within such a social context inundated with tremendous uncertainty and disagreement about gender and yet still dominated by patriarchal ideology,

> What could be more unexpected than making the sole protagonist and survivor a woman?... women as heroic survivors was a concept alien enough to constitute a surprise for the audience while at the same time not so foreign that it would put mainstream audiences off. (Gallardo and Smith 2004, 17)

The chapters in this collection reflect the uncertainty and disagreement about gender as well as the importance of the relationship between biography and history in that they illustrate that there is not a singular

meaning of Ripley but rather multiple meanings that are consequences of the creators of the series and their social contexts, the audience members and their social contexts, and the relationships between these two groups.

This collection offers discussions of Ripley with particular attention to feminism, autonomy, and sexual agency in relation to the context of gender during the time period in which the films were released. As a whole, it is multidisciplinary and, therefore, augments debates and discussions not only in film criticism but also popular culture, philosophy, sociology, and Gender and Women's Studies. In planning this book, I had in mind an audience of undergraduate students studying in these areas. Consequently, while the book is intellectually stimulating, it does not fall victim to the overuse of discipline-specific jargon that would frustrate those who are unfamiliar with the terminology. Rather it invites them, as well as the general population, to see that there are commonalities across disciplines.

Ripley is presented as a product of Second Wave, Radical Feminism, as a traditional woman and mother under patriarchy, as Other who, in refusing to be used by the Company or by the alien ultimately transcends to an authentic self, as an individual who poses sexual agency, and as an autonomous individual who is not limited by the constraints of gender role expectations. The varying interpretations are rooted in the varied backgrounds of each contributor—some are female and some are male, some are Canadian and some are American, some are junior scholars while others have established careers, and four distinct disciplines (or groups) are represented. As can be seen in the following pages, each of these individuals is quite conscious of their own biographical relationship to history and that it has influenced what they see and how they interpret.[2]

The collection begins and ends with chapters that specifically point to the importance of the social context in relation to gender while Chapters Two, Three, and Four focus on Ripley as reflective of social circumstances within the contexts of the films with particular attention to ideas of motherhood, femininity, and sexual agency.

Chapter One, *Alien Feminist*, by George Moore, examines the first film in the quadrilogy, *Alien*. Moore, who teaches English Literature and published a book length study on the feminist, Gertrude Stein, readily admits that

> the changes in the feminist movement during the Seventies were part of the larger social changes that influenced me a tremendous amount… my

[2] The contributors have provided brief statements that offer the reader insights about their approach in analyzing Ripley.

> critical approach is simply a way of me evaluating my own past and my changed perspective on it.

In this chapter, Moore takes up the question of whether Ripley is a feminist as the concept was understood in the 1970s and 1980s. He identifies the importance of the social context when attempting to understand the creation of *Alien* and the development of Ripley's role.

> Ripley's role, and the film's general attitude toward women, are products of a changing feminist awareness... the point might… be made that the film helps historicize the movement's concerns during this particular period of upheaval.

In Chapter Two, "Redressing Ripley: Disrupting the Female Hero," Peter Wood is undoing the idea of Ripley as a feminist hero in *Aliens* and argues that she is consistent with patriarchal ideas of woman and motherhood. In his chapter, he states that the film

> essentializes Ripley in ways that reinforce the fundamental, natural, and intrinsic connection between being female and having a lower social status than males, as well as the fact that being female means being, always already, a mother.

However, his objective in putting forth this claim is to reveal, through attention to the often neglected elements of the film, that hero status does not ensure escape from oppression:

> In a larger sense, I wanted to reinforce the idea that being an action hero does not immediately and easily do away with all traces of sexism. Indeed, some films, like *Aliens*, can present a strong female character and yet still offer a conservative message of what it means to be a woman.

Eva Dadlez, who teaches Philosophy and Women's Studies, explores the parallels between Ripley's struggles in *Alien*^{3} and Simone de Beaviour's notion of the *myth of the feminine* and Ripley's transcendence in Chapter Three, "Paradox and Transcendence in *Alien*^{3}: Ripley Through the Eyes of Simone de Beauvoir." Making use of de Beaviour's work is a perfect fit for Dadlez. She sums up the rationale behind her approach by saying that she

> Love[s] Simone de Beaviour! Always thought of her as a feminist touchstone that exposed cultural hypocrisy, as it's exposed in *Alien*^{3}.

In her chapter, Dadlez explains that the film "embodies many of the insights inherent in de Beauvoir's *myth of the feminine*.

> This particular fiction does so… by affiliating its heroine Ripley with the alien, a true Other… and then by stressing the difference and alienness of Ripley's sex in presenting her against the backdrop of the almost exclusively masculine world… Next, it does so by presenting Ripley in paradoxically incompatible roles… Finally, the film conveys de Beauvoir's insights by showing us Ripley's transcendence.

In Chapter Four, "Getting off the Boat: Hybridity and Sexual Agency in the *Alien* Films," Sarah Bach and Jessica Langer argue that there is a visible progression of Ripley's sexual agency across the four films. Through their examination of the quadrilogy, they reveal the process by which Ripley is able to shed patriarchal control in some respects but is ultimately not able to defeat patriarchy itself. Bach and Langer explain that by the end of *Alien Resurrection*:

> She no longer needs to take part in heterosexual sexual exchange in order to succeed within the system of patriarchy, but instead this line foreshadows her breaking of the system itself, utilizing her newfound human-alien hybridity to place herself outside the system and bring it down from without. This chapter will trace the development of Ripley's sexual agency throughout the *Alien* films in her relationships with aliens and with other humans – and, ultimately, within her own hybridity and that of the aliens.

For Sarah Bach, it was not just her background in Cinema Studies that brought her to examine the character of Ellen Ripley:

> Thanks to my mother, 'Aliens' has been one of my favourite movies since I was six years old. At first I identified most strongly with Newt, but as I grew older and my understanding of feminism and our culture expanded, I saw that development mirrored in the changes that Ripley undergoes through the series. Ripley has been a source of inspiration for as long as I can remember.

Her co-author, Jessica Langer, explains that there is a parallel between their examination of Ripley and her earlier work:

> Although most of my academic work focuses in various ways on postcolonialism and science fiction, I have always found it interesting to explore how systems of oppression—such as colonialism and patriarchy—

> can be so similar and are often intertwined both in history and in cultural production.

Finally, in Chapter Five, "*Aliens'* Ellen Ripley: Ambiguous Interpretations and Her Autonomy," I explicitly return to the notion of social context arguing that it must be taken into account when considering interpretations of Ripley. As someone who teaches Sociology and Gender and Women's Studies, my interest in the social context, and the relationship between the individual and society should not be surprising. In my chapter, I point to three common interpretations of Ripley that are reflective of a social context influenced by Second Wave Feminism and the backlash against it—the monstrous feminine, the woman in man's clothes, and the traditional woman and mother.

> In addition, accepting that feminist scholars "need… to also study change and equality when it occurs rather than only documenting inequality" (Risman 2004, 435), I also offer an alternative interpretation of Ripley that reflects societal changes related to gender.

I offer my own view of Ripley as an autonomous individual; an interpretation that reflects both my roots in Second Wave Feminism and my move away from it:

> While it [Second Wave Feminism] is part of who I am and how I see the world, I have become more and more dissatisfied with feminism's reluctance to see women as anything other than victims of patriarchy.

All of the contributors in this collection not despite but because of their differences offer valuable interpretations of Ripley and her societies, as well as our societies. It is, therefore, my hope that as a whole the collection will foster discussions and debates not just about women in science fiction/action/horror films but about the ongoing issues regarding gender in Western societies.

In addition to the five chapters, this collection includes five appendices and a selected bibliography[3] that can be used as resources for those unfamiliar with the films, the pairing of *Alien* and *Predator* films, the work of the *Alien Quadrilogy* creators, and the extensive literature. In

[3] This bibliography includes all the sources used in the following chapters that specifically centre on Ripley and the *Alien Quadrilogy* as well as sources not used in this collection.

general, these appendices and bibliography provide further insight into the contexts from which the films emerged.

The first four appendices are summaries of the *Alien* films with specific notations to indicate where and how the Director's Cut/ Special Edition of each film differs from the Theatrical Releases. I made this decision because in some instances the two versions of each film vary in significant ways and have resulted in noteworthy interpretative differences. Recognizing, as this collection does, the importance of context in interpreting meaning, it seemed necessary to outline these variations. For example, whether someone is commenting on the climactic scene in *Alien*[3] when Ripley, "Cruciform arms extended, obviously Christlike… falls backwards into the light" (Dadlez), or the scene in the altered Theatrical Release in which Ripley embraces the alien queen that has exploded from her chest as she falls backward into the flames of the furnace will, without question, affect the meanings that are ultimately attached to the film. Appendices E is meant to offer the reader peripheral information that while not directly related to the content of the four *Alien* films is part of the context. It begins with a brief overview of *Predator I* and *II*, but is primarily a summary of the *Alien vs Predator* films which were intended to revitalize the *Alien* franchise but failed.

That the contributors come from a variety of disciplines and few specialize in film studies but have come together in this collection to create a work focusing on the trail blazing character of Ellen Ripley, demonstrates her continued significance approximately thirty years after her first appearance in *Alien*. In addition to the varied contributions of these authors about the *Meanings of Ripley* and the resources provided in the Appendices, it is worth noting that this collection also ventures outside of the prevailing arguments found within the established field of film criticism.

I hope that as a collection this book which largely represents perspectives of those outside film criticism will open discussions to a more general audience and encourages others to look to the past as well as the present when formulating their assessments of an iconic character such as Ripley. The complex and contradictory facets of her character encourage investigation, discussion, and repeated revisiting of previous conclusions. In addition, Ripley, like other fictional characters, has the potential to further our understandings of ourselves and our societies when we explore how and why we come to specific conclusions about *Meanings of Ripley*.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE *ALIEN* FEMINIST

GEORGE MOORE

Introduction

Lt. Ellen Ripley's individual film images are rarely distinguished today from the journey she takes through the four films of the *Alien* series. She has now become iconic as the subsequent films have inculcated popular reaction to her developing feminist image. This suggests society's need to perpetuate her difference over the decades. But it is significant that the Ripley of the original *Alien* movie creates a much more conflicted image than the one built up through the series of films. Ripley engages the audience as a representative of the women's movement, and particularly its Second Wave struggle for affirmation during the period of the film's production in the late 1970s. The conflicts within the women's movement at the time are themselves reinvented in different ways by a host of writers, producers, directors, and actors, including the two women who act in the film. Sigourney Weaver's first effort as Ripley was a product of a feminist awareness if not of feminist thinking associated with the movement itself, and so the character incorporates both feminist ideas and reactions against feminism. But the strongest context for Ripley is certainly the advent of the Radical Feminists, first emerging during the late 1960s and coming to power within the larger women's movement by the 1970s. Radical Feminism distinguished itself by its call for an abandonment of the old thinking about reconciliation with the enemy, men, and a demand for a newly constructed society based primarily if not exclusively on women's needs. The *radical* element was associated with New Left radicalism in the 1960s, and so also picked up a certain initial adherence to Marxist ideology (Roth 2004, 200-205). Ripley is no Marxist, nor is she fully conceived in the guise of a feminist extremist such as the Radical Feminists themselves came to be seen. *Feminist Practice*, a publication issued in the 1970s, for instance, declares that the word radical:

> was used as a term of abuse to corral those aspects of [women's liberation] which most threatened their image of respectability. Radical Feminists became a corporate object of derision which these women and men could then dissociate themselves from. (Rowland and Klein 1996, 10)

If no extremist, Ripley's character shows definite signs of an awareness of changes in the movement during the late 1970s which include its radicalization. This can be attributed, in part, to a general awareness of Radical Feminism and to the film's various writers, producers, and actors who engaged the popular notion of militancy within the movement.

The purpose here is to suggest how Ripley's role and the film's general attitude toward women are products of a changing feminist awareness. Although neither could be conceived as addressing the feminist concerns of the decades since the film's release—in particular, the importance of the social construction of gender and the place of race, class and culture in determining those roles— the point might yet be made that the film helps historicize the movement's concerns during this particular period of upheaval. In the end, it is Ripley's relationship to the emerging conflicts centred around Radical Feminism that best suits her original role in *Alien*, and which best provides a means of exploring the contradictions found in her image as both the product of male discourse (in writers, director and producers) and the society's desire to find in her an image of the liberated woman.

Ripley and Radical Feminism in 1970s America

What happens to Ripley in *Alien* is actually the radicalization of her character through events in the film which expose the patriarchal nature of the Company's plans. The Company represents the nefarious business interests centred on retrieving the alien for possible bio-weaponry purposes. Ripley's radicalization occurs late in the film, whereas early in the film she is much more in line with the women's movement as it was just prior to the first *liberationists*, or women who decided that separate and self-sustaining was better than equal. These women saw that the old promise of gender equality was merely the perpetuation of the more conservative social forces that sought to keep women hopeful but waiting and in check. Within the movement, the debate was between the earlier fight for gender equality and the later call for complete liberation (Berkeley 1999, 39-55). This struggle parallels the film's production period, and can be read through various dimensions of the film's engagement with feminist ideas. In her history of the movement, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism In America, 1967-1975* (1989), Alice Echols

argues that women within the movement were forced to decide between two ideologies, "the ideology of gender equality" or the more radical "ideology of difference" (289). The public view of this difference has a great deal to do with Ripley's role in the film, not just because of its popular image as vocal and self-assertive, but because the new association promoted a more militant stance on women's rights. As Winifred D. Wandersee suggests:

> The radical feminists offered an extreme critique of American society, which, because it did not allow room for compromise, encouraged the *possibility* of separatism rather than activism, and a search for personal solutions to political problems. (1988, xv)

That separatism manifested itself in a new breed of independence and, to some extent, a form of social alienation, both aspects of which seem apparent in Ripley's character.

At its outset, *Alien* presents us with the perfect paradigm (or perhaps parody) of the earlier quest for gender equality. As the single female officer aboard the commercial towing vehicle, the Nostromo, Ripley has achieved her station in the Company's chain of command by hard work, as is indicated by her take-charge attitude toward daily procedures, and her insistence on being included in all discussions that affect the crew's mission and the ship's operation. She strikes audiences as a self-motivated and career-minded woman, conscious of the latent sexism that the system displays when male officers and crew members simply ignore her comments and suggestions. And she deals amiably, if authoritatively, even with these situations, as in the case of the engineer Parker's demands for equitable pay and Ash's nullification of her authority when Dallas, the captain, is off the ship. Parker complains that he and his assistant, Brent, deserve "equal shares" in the commission of the Company's business. Ripley points out to him that he is already entitled to a "full share," demonstrating that she knows more than he about Company pay scales and contracts. With Ash, there are darker motives involved in his opening the air lock against her direct order. She would not risk infecting the rest of the crew; he would risk it all for a chance to examine an unknown species. But later, she coxes Ash into letting down his guard about his hidden desires, and he shows his strange admiration for the lethal alien that is now onboard. She does this, however, only to point out abruptly his violation of quarantine and the superseding of her authority in the countermanding of her direct order. It seems certain that the audience identifies both of these instances initially with Ripley's adept handling of male chauvinism, and only later, for Ash, with the greater subplot of the Company's desire for

the alien. Early on, then, Ripley demonstrates her rank within the hierarchy of the Company's command and would seem to support a position of equal rights, if she can but get the conventions of command and law to support her authority.

Toward the end of the 1960s and into the decade of the film, the women's movement in America focused its efforts on women's rights and equal opportunity in hopes that women's roles would change if they could escape the traditional confines of home and family that had limited their success in the workplace and society (Tobias 1997, 212). The result, by the early 1970s, was an increase of women's positions in business and social organizations, and a more prominent general understanding of women's leadership acumen (Carden 1977, 35). But changes were slow, and the movement itself had to contend with increasing discontent in its ranks with the lack of gains in two decades of struggle. This was the crisis that gave rise to the Radical Feminists, and actually to the resurgence of the word *feminist* generally (Crow 2000, 2). Those who saw themselves as Radical Feminists now demanded something more than occupational role changes; they called for a separate understanding of women's concerns, and saw sexism and women's oppression as the root causes of all other problems facing women of the day (Crow 2000, 2).

The more radical call for independence coincided with the failure to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) after years of state by state battles and with a resurgence of conservatism among both men in power and women who were voicing their objections to the radicalization of the women's rights movement. The use of the system to change the system was failing, and it is not surprising that the old Marxist mandates of social reform from the New Left found their way back into the rhetoric of Radical Feminism's demand for an abandonment of efforts to work within the system. In rejecting the capitalist and patriarchal mandates of the society, they began an effort to create a society of their own (Berkeley 1999, 44; Echols 1989, 14). The ideology of difference brought with it more public demonstrations, and soon developed a more militant public image for feminists in the movement, an image that Hollywood and other media would find an easy label (Echols 1989, 289). But it was also natural, according to Kathleen C. Berkeley, that the radical image became popular:

> Women with more flamboyant personalities and styles had little difficulty in capturing and playing to the media attention; and for these women, the more outrageous and radical their stance or action, the easier it became to popularize their political message. (1999, 47)

Radicalism was a response to a frustration some women felt over the failure to accomplish lasting gains. If the women's movement had achieved strategic goals, "job access, the right to a medically assisted abortion, the equal access to credit" (Tobias 1997, 96), there were objectives that continued to elude them, and for many these culminated in the stalled passage of the ERA. But the real split between the radicals and the movement occurred more as a popular image than in the movement itself; as Berkeley suggests:

> the more liberationists pushed the radical button, the easier it became for the media and the public to assume incorrectly that there was a fixed and unalterable division between mainstream, liberal equality feminism… and avant-garde, radical, liberation feminism. (1999, 52)

Political exigencies demanded that the movement remain cohesive (Berkeley 1999, 52-54), but the media persisted in aggrandizing the new radical element. Radical feminism became the bad girl mystique of the movement even as it was legitimately trying to establish a stronger feminine base for the core of the organization. Consequently, the Radical Feminisms were often marginalized even within the movement itself (Bell and Klein 1996, 10). But women had discovered that going along with the system even in order to ultimately change it meant compromising at times their ideals. Co-opted by the very process of their own involvement in trying to reform society, many proclaimed society irredeemable and abandoned political efforts all together (Tobias 1997, 227-228; Crow 2000, 3).

Ripley's character manages to chart some of these changes through her attitudes and decisions in the film, especially as she evolves from a Company woman, dedicated to equal rights and official protocol, to a radical liberationist who in the final scenes destroys the spaceship, Nostromo, ending the Company's commercial and scientific ventures in direct overthrow of her earlier demonstrations of authority. It is significant that her initial *feminist* role would appear more radical to audiences at the time than perhaps it was, but it makes clear that the producers, screenwriters and director, and the film industry generally, were aware of the claims for equality made by the movement. Ripley appears to achieve her rank as third officer by an explicit trust in the hierarchical assumptions of the organization and an investment in the micro-society of the ship. But the sexist nature of the patriarchy there finally overrides the hierarchal structure of command. What at first appears to be merely annoying instances of misogyny in Parker, Ash, and others, turn out to be an underlining ideology of the micro-society and its intentional suppression

of one woman's independence. Ripley appears at first to believe in the system in which she has invested time and energy, pointing out infringements of protocol and regulations when others demonstrate neglect and annoyance with official rule, and so she takes on her feminist role in the audience's mind initially through moments of right action and proper office.

Alien suggests the nature of this change toward a radical social awareness in Ripley's final rejection of the Company, an act that reflects a major shift in policy within the women's movement. The ERA spent most of the decade in state houses seeking ratification after U.S. Congressional passage in 1972 (Tobias 1997, 137). The greatest push was in 1972-1982 when equal rights were at the forefront of feminist efforts and of society's awareness. Ripley's self-awareness of her position shows a growing awareness in Hollywood of this situation. Fox Studios had already voiced an interest in stronger roles for women when the script for *Alien* was submitted. Producers were increasingly aware of female audiences and looking for more films with female leads (McIntee 2005, 25). With what looked like a possible victory for the ERA in the late 1970s, women began to assume a different future, and called repeatedly for the end of elitism based on sex (Crow 2000, 1). Advancements in equal opportunity, particularly under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, for a decade or more had allowed women the legal right to challenge "discrimination based on sex" (Wandersee 1988, 17-18). Ripley takes this new entitlement to heart, and confronts job related chauvinism on a number of fronts. The problem is that the Company represents more than social legitimacy; it represents the inherent inequalities of power. Audiences finally realize the Company for the nefarious force that guides the commercial and capitalist ventures at the core of the crew's missions, while secretly mandating the prerogatives of scientific acquisition by prioritizing the capture of an alien species above any concern for human life. The gender based distinctions coincide with the Company's priorities, that the scientific discovery, and potential capital gain, represented by the alien, outweigh human considerations.

An unseen presence, the Company voices its priorities by means of "Mother," the onboard computer, and by Ash, the science officer, later exposed as an android working in the Company's interest. The hidden dimension of the Company supports the nature of patriarchal power, a given in this microcosmic world of quasi-military command structures. Unfortunately, Ripley's assumptions about authority also derive from this same official order, even though in the end the Company considers the crew "expendable" and shows itself more evil even than the alien. The

earlier examples of sexism with Parker and Ash now become more central as examples of the breakdown of the equal rights promise and of the reaction of the working class against the new radicalization of the women's movement.

When Parker attempts to control Ripley by commanding she come back to face him and answer his complaints in the engine room, she ignores him, turning only as she is leaving to say: "Why don't you just fuck off," her words blurred by engine room noise. Then she adds a parting gibe: "I'll be on the bridge if you need me." She confronts Parker's sense of sexual superiority, which is continually frustrated by Ripley self-assurance as an officer. In the year the film was released, Catherine MacKinnon wrote that "Economic power is to sexual harassment as physical force is to rape" (Tobias 1997, 114). Parker's rage over economic inequality has sexual overtones and seems at times to border on physical violence. It may be that this loss of power triggers a violence only partially veiled in his threats and crude sexual innuendoes, as when he jokes about cuntilinguism with Lambert over the group dinner table.

Parker here represents not only the film industry's awareness of the need for racial equality, but also problems associated with the radical feminists' prioritizing gender over race. Critics like James Kavanagh see Ripley's and Parker's mutual efforts against the alien as an indication of the social commonwealth of women's liberation and the working classes. Kavanagh finds minorities at the time struggling to overcome a hegemonic system represented by the computer "Mother" (1990, 77). But the deeper sexual tensions preclude any kind of true sympathy between Parker and Ripley even in the final crisis, a point supported by segments cut from the film where Parker "talks to Brett about his desire to do violence to Ripley" (Kaveney 2005, 135). More to the point, Parker's role simply diminishes after Dallas' death when Ripley finally takes charge. Parker's early role, then, is in direct opposition to Ripley as feminist, aggravated by the fact that his call for wage equity is simply dismissed by her. If the women's movement initially sought to incorporate Marxist ideology from the New Left, it ultimately rejected it in favour of a purely gender-based argument (Roth 2004, 200-205). As Echols points out:

> radical feminists' tendency to subordinate class and race to gender and to speak hyperbolically about a universal sisterhood was in large measure a reaction to the left's penchant for privileging class and race over gender. (1989, 10)

Parker stands out in contrast to Ripley, who maintains her authority specifically in relationship to the ship's hierarchies. It is also apparent that he reacts not so much to authority as to *female authority*, a threat to the last domain of power accessible to him, sexual power. Ripley refuses this, along with his criticisms of the class and wage structure, because her authority is dependent on a system that has, officially at least, been blind to gender. She shows no sympathy with his working class demands, and even ignores his initial complaints. The movement feminists, Echols suggests, were often only "anti-capitalist" by early association with the New Left; radical feminists, on the other hand, "dismissed economic class struggle as 'male' and, therefore, irrelevant to women" (1989, 6-7), and it never became a priority (Richardson 1996, 147).

But Parker also fits another stereotype of the times, and one that plays into the film's sexual tensions. As Shulamith Firestone characterizes the situation with men in the Black Power movement in the 70s by suggesting that black women were:

> merely a buttress for his own (masculine) self-image. The same old trick in revolutionary guise: the male defining himself negatively as man-strong by distinguishing himself from women-weak, through his control of her… achieving a false sense of manhood (power) through domination of all females in his vicinity. (Crow 2000, 440)

The gender domination, the frustrated struggle for male authority, and the working class overtones of the revolutionary struggle are all elements in the make-up of Parker's character. Here, by focusing almost exclusively on Ripley's feminism, many early critics of the film missed the racial stereotype in Parker's character. It appears again in his final display of heroics in stepping between Lambert and the alien in an act of self-sacrifice. Dallas earlier hints that Parker's heroics have been a problem in the past, and he warns him against rash actions. The maleness of Parker's self-image is important, and can be seen at times in his dominance over Lambert (almost as if in retaliation for Ripley's denial of this authority). Ripley prioritizes her own gendered power by refusing Parker's claims to economic equality or sexual authority. She intentionally ignores both race and working class arguments, much as the "White feminists" of the time would, whose

> universalist ideas about the nature of gender oppression grew out of further attempts to argue against others who saw feminism as disruptive and diversionary to radical politics. (Roth 2004, 194)

Ash's threat to her authority is different, although still gender based. He ignores her authority when he opens the air lock explicitly against her command when she would have the infected Kane and landing party go through proper quarantine. Ripley later makes her command role explicit to him, and yet it is clear that Ash's actions are guided not only by his desire to retrieve the alien for the Company, but by his distinct dislike for Ripley *as a woman*. Audiences become aware of Ash's sexism, even as they do of the crew's. At times, Ripley and Ash appear to be competing for Dallas's attentions with Ash taking the side of science and playing up aspects of male bonding as they share a fascination with the nature of the alien, and Ripley by her demands that Dallas recognize the legitimacy of her position as officer and equal. When compared with Ash's obsequious behaviour around Dallas, whose command he questions but never refutes, with Ripley he feigns a concern for Kane's well being, dropping all pretence to scientific protocol. Interestingly, where most critics find Ripley a little inhumane in her strict adherence to protocol at the risk of Kane's life (Kavanagh 1990, 79), few have seen that Ash tries to manipulate Ripley by appealing to her humanity, the "traditional realms" of female understanding. This moment, however, initiates the conflict that will end with Ash's attack on her, and his own exposure as android.

Feminists of the day would recognize their own struggle for equal rights in Ripley's dealings with Parker, Ash, and Dallas, as well as identifying the forces that gave rise to radicalization. Even as Ripley ultimately becomes conscious of the truth of her difference, a faction of women in the movement were realizing what critics Rowland and Klein see as a crucial realization: "Patriarchy is the oppressing *structure* of male domination," and "'emancipation' or 'equality' on male terms is not enough" (1996, 11-12). Involvement with the New Left had shown that all conditions of oppression are systemic, not local. By the early 1970s, Radical Feminism was talking about a totally new kind of society in ways that frightened the more conservative elements in both male and female segments of the culture. But the radical element was also aware that you cannot fight the system from within. As Maren Lockwood Carden suggests:

> In identifying one's interests with those of any power class, one thereby maintains the position of that class. As long as any class system is left standing, it stands on the back of women. (Rowland and Klein 1996, 12)

This growing realization of failure, and the perpetuation of traditional standards, was a turning point. The more the social system proved incapable

of accommodating ideas of independence, the more women refused to work strictly within the realm of the equal rights agenda.

Underlying the feminist Ripley, however, are even more basic problems of the male construction of her gender. *Alien's* director, screenwriters and producers—all male—were not simply engaging but reacting to the same ideological shifts in the popular image of feminism described above. In particular, director Ridley Scott, and producers David Giler and Walter Hill, both also secondary screenwriters, were obviously taken with the new, more militant feminist image. Yet these male ideas about feminism are the heart of the problem. Their shared understanding of women's liberation tends toward stereotypes, and their designs seem based on popular, often adverse, responses to Radical Feminism. Their choice of a woman to play the part of Ripley and the focus on her final independence seems to have been a late decision in the film's evolution. According to David McIntee, whose insightful work, *Beautiful Monsters: The Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to the Alien and Predator Films*, provides a detailed film history, Giler and Hill, in their revisions to Dan O'Bannon's original screenplay, added elements of anti-capitalist and anti-corporate themes (2005, 25-6). But these contrast starkly with Ripley's early insistence on official protocol and her officer status. With their promotion of Ripley as an equal rights crusader, Scott and the others may have hoped to gain sympathy for their hero among female audiences. And yet by aligning her with the officer class they also confuse the nature of her Radical Feminism. The sense of her as a simple reformist seems to be supported by the fact that the role was initially written as a standard sci-fi character type; she was to be the one who questions authority and runs contrary to general accepted opinions (but who inevitably is proven right). Such rebel figures were important to audience identification; the hero's difference is based on insights into the dangers that audiences are sensing (McIntee 2005, 25-7).

In addition, Ripley's role was originally conceived and written by Dan O'Bannon as unisex, and called "Roby." Unisex, of course, meant "male" in screenwriting jargon from the era, and so was initially constructed without any traditional female qualities. "Shussett has admitted that they both thought of the characters as all-male, and just felt that the option of using women would make it more marketable"; and the original script itself reads: "The crew is unisex and all parts are interchangeable for men or women" (McIntee 2005, 22)**.** When her gender was changed by Giler and Hill in their revisions to the script, they have her retain most of the standard character's rebellious assertiveness (McIntee 2005, 25). Ripley begins as outsider, but in part only because the others in the crew are

neglectful of their duties and casual about their concerns with the mission. That is, other than Kane, who is quick, alert, and overeager about all things scientific, but he dies first and leaves no one but the robot, Ash, to see the true consequences of the alien's presence onboard ship. This is a horror film, after all, and it must be remembered that suspense is built by having the audience sense what those in the film do not seem to know. Yet Ripley's identity gets mixed in with this, and as filmmakers began to see the uniqueness and marketability of a female protagonist (but also of a women with an attitude), it becomes clear they added her perspective *as a woman* to the standardized anticipation that she will be the sole survivor.

Sigourney Weaver's interpretation of the role goes beyond even the final shooting script in ways that suggest her own participation in feminizing Ripley, but also her sometimes conflicted sense of her role.[1] The film is a complex interaction of artistic forces, and not simply the "product of masculine discourse," as some have suggested (Gallardo and Smith 2004, 3). Scott appears to have been caught off guard at times in interviews by the feminist question, so his comments give us insights into the popular notion of feminism at the time: "My film has strong women simply because I like strong women," he says:

> It's a personal choice. I'm in no way a male chauvinist, nor do I understand female chauvinism—I just believe in the equality of men and women. It's as simple as that. (Knapp and Kulas 2005, 48)

Scott's "female chauvinism" may reflect the popular idea of the Radical Feminists as "anti-male" because of their separatist demands. But it is also obvious that the feminism discussed by the filmmakers was tempered by the early feminist criticisms of it.

It is on the point of equal rights that critics seem to have mostly condemned Ripley's role initially. Robin Wood, for instance, writing in the 70s, finds Ripley's feminism simplistic, a reduction of complex issues to clichés. The film, he complains, does not live up to its own expectations:

> What it offers on this level amounts in fact to no more than a 'pop' feminism that reduces the whole involved question of sexual difference and thousands of years of patriarchal oppression to the bright suggestion that a woman can do anything a man can do (almost). (1985, 218-219)

[1] Cf. Walter Hill and David Giler, "Alien" Final Shooting Script. 1978. http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/alien_shooting.html.