God, I'm quite bright.'" I mean, a lot of films have that kind of attitude. I like films which puzzle you a little bit. I like Leo the Last, by [John] Boorman, where you don't know what to make out of it. I think it's a supermasterpiece, it's a great, great film, great film. I like Badlands, which I think is a very important film. At the same time, when I see a film like The Color of Money, I say, "My God, I would like one day to be able to do that kind of very, very beautiful demonstration of what direction is about." The good films, at the same time they inspire you and they make you feel very, very modest. I know that certain directors say that it's depressing to see a film which is so great because you feel that you will never do it. I don't feel at all like that. Yesterday, after seeing The Color of Money, I immediately wanted to start to work on a film set again and try to see if I could do as well in certain things.

LYNDA K. BUNDTZEN

Monstrous Mothers
Medusa, Grendel, and now Alien

Will there be a sequel to Aliens? Its depiction of female fecundity, prolific and devouring, is so powerful and fictively generative, it would be hard for an equally profit-hungry movie industry to resist another visitation by the Alien Mama and her spawn. The Company in Aliens certainly seems eager for the monster's survival. In both the original Alien and the current sequel, a sleazy Company man (actually an android in Alien), stirred by the profit-motive, is engaged in nefarious dirty tricks to return an alien embryo to the Company's labs on earth. The lingering question at the end of Aliens is whether, in fact, the Company man Burke has succeeded—whether the figures encapsuled in space-sleep for the return journey harbor an Alien embryo. The image of sleeping beauties and heroines Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and the young girl she saves, Newt (Carrie Henn), is disquieting. The Alien is an elusive, slippery parasite, with incredible ability to pop up and out of the most unlikely places. The last Alien appearance in this film occurs after the space ship leaves the infected planet. Just when the audience believes all danger is past—following what seemed to be a final harrowing escape by Ripley and Newt—the android Bishop is pierced through his belly by what first looks like an Alien birth and is then revealed to be the Alien Mama herself. She has somehow managed to maneuver her dragon's girth undetected on to the departing space ship, and roars into life for a final showdown with Ripley. With this improbable return after the story seemed to have climaxed, an unsteady audience may well wonder if the film's ingenious writer-director James Cameron hasn't still another ending in mind, and if not ends, sequels.

Within the thematic structure of the narrative, however, there are even more compelling reasons to expect the Alien's eternal return. The disquietude we may feel gazing at the virginal sleep of Ripley and her foster daughter Newt is a result, I believe, of our intuition that it disguises the potential threat they apparently have defeated and escaped. Narrative instability is reinforced cinematically in the camera's final dissolve from a medium shot of the sleeping Ripley and Newt to a close-up that invites a quizzical inspection from the audience: what are we looking for in these ostensibly peaceful figures? Defeat and escape from the female and Alien other is, I will show, only provisional and temporary. Aliens, I will argue, is a profoundly disturbing allegory about contemporary feminism, and it is far from resolving the issues it explores about woman's nature vs. her culture-making aspirations.

The heroine of Aliens is no feminist ideo-
logue, but surely an exemplary figure for women in her rugged independence, cool courage under fire, and resourcefulness. In both *Alien* and *Aliens*, Ripley is characterized as fighting male bias against women doing the kind of work she does and shown asserting both her authority (in *Alien* she is the ship’s security officer) and her right to command men with less intelligence and nerve. Physically, she is a rangy six-footer, agile and strong, and demonstrably capable of any swashbuckling feats performed by male heroes. In *Aliens*, though, she is further endowed with a more traditionally feminine trait: her loving, maternal nurturance of the young girl, Newt. Newt (a nickname I will return to later) is the sole survivor of the Alien’s annihilation of an entire colony of humans sent by the Company to exploit the resources of an unpopulated planet. This relationship between Ripley and Newt has inspired a feminist sentimentality that diverts attention from the film’s menacing depiction of female sexuality in the Alien.

Who or what is the Alien? Ripley’s foe is a primal mother defined solely by her devouring jaws and her prolific egg-production. As her eggs open, presumably triggered by the presence of a human host, they splat (I can think of no better word here) on the face of a victim. This intermediate Alien form resembles female genitalia, surrounded by crab legs and a long whip-like tail. The tail wraps around the victim’s throat and chokes the host’s mouth open for oral rape. When, for example, Ripley struggles with one of the lab specimens, the monster’s tail is wound tightly around her neck, choking Ripley’s mouth open for embryo implantation. From a vaginal cavity, a penis-like finger juts into the throat and implants an alien embryo deep into the viscera of a host. This vagina *cum* penis appears when a lab specimen darts furiously at its glass enclosure, and we see a little finger poking out of a slit. This fusion of male and female sexual organs does not make Aliens androgynous. The monster’s femininity is confirmed by the vulva and labia which surround the slit—a graphic display of female anatomy—and an incident between the android Bishop and another marine. Bishop is studying a dead Alien specimen, carefully tweezing aside the folds of flesh around the vaginal opening, when another marine lewdly comments, “I think it likes you.”

After an initial struggle with this smothering Alien form, the host endures embryo implantation and gestation in a death-like sleep. The crab-like structure falls off the face, and at least in *Alien*, the host has a brief waking spell of seeming normality. The embryo, however, has developed a large head with extraordinary jaws and finally gnaws its way out in a violent Caesarean birth that destroys its human host. In *Alien* singular, only one monster is born. The other members of Ripley’s first crew are presumably devoured by the Alien, who grows larger with each human morsel. The opening of *Alien* shows, however, a landscape of eggs ready to adopt human hosts, and in *Aliens*, the colonists have wandered into this no-man’s land (the result, we learn from Ripley’s investigations, of Burke’s treacherous orders). Despite Aliens’ voracity, many colonists have not yet been eaten. Homing devices implanted in the colonists’ bodies lead the rescue squad to where they have been captured instead for hosting eggs. I cannot help but reflect here that the Aliens’ self-replication must be limited by the food and/or host supply, but laying eggs seems to be an imperative superseding any consideration of what is available for sustenance. Perhaps the Alien Mama surmises humans’ ambivalent attraction and repulsion to her dangers.¹

Fighting Aliens poses innumerable hazards. Their scuttling speed and wraparound tails are comprehensible dangers. In addition, however, they have mysterious bodily fluids and several retractable jaws nesting inside one another. Shooting an Alien results in spurts of Alien “blood.” This blood is acid and it sears through everything—flesh, bone, plastic, steel. If one must shoot them, then, it should be at a considerable distance and without fear of acid-damage to one’s environment. A better strategy is to burn them with flame-throwers, and this is the technique Ripley eventually uses to great advantage in the penultimate confrontation with the Alien Mama. The jaws of Aliens seem to have an immobilizing, hypnotic effect on their victims, or at least their opening jaws are punctuated by lengthy reaction shots, suggesting a resemblance to the Medusa’s paralysis of her victims.² Aliens’ jaws are gooey, secreting a vis-
cous fluid that cocoons human beings in a spider-like web for future egg-implantation. The secretions of the Big Mama Alien also seem eventually to harden into a vast network of hatcheries. One final bit of Alien lore: in *Alien* the monster is described by the robot scientist as “biologically a perfect creature” and invulnerable to human technology. Its strength assures escape from any kind of prison created by human ingenuity and its jaws assure penetration of any fortress. Neither capture nor defense is possible and both films end with
flight. But Aliens are no longer invulnerable in the sequel, where a few lab specimens are suspended quietly in large test tube vats and many are blown apart or resisted by grenade blasts and fire power.

The Alien Mama’s mucilaginous “art work” is an organic colossus. Its reticulated curves (resembling ribs) and labyrinthine structure contrast visually with the severity of plastic, steel, and glass environs, the grid-like regularity of lines that dominates the man-made interiors of space ships, shuttles, and complexes in this futuristic world. Youthful Aliens are embedded in this structure, and when disturbed, drop like roaches out of the woodwork. There appears, in fact, to be no outside to this inside, no perspective from which to see the enemy Alien whole and distinct. There’s a disturbing sense in which the Alien’s polymorphous body lacks integrity and identity. The technological environment is, much of the time, as dark and maze-like as the Alien’s and spatial orientation for the viewer is nearly impossible, adding to the confusion and terror of not knowing where one is in relation to the Alien. Despite this frequently greasy-machinery appearance, the shine of technology seems somehow clean, even antiseptic in its freedom from the Alien’s wastes and slime. When the marine rescue squad in Aliens first enters the area of the space station taken over by Aliens, they are utterly baffled by the way everything has been goaded, webbed, slimed and altered in shape and design. The colonists trapped in Alien Mama’s art work also bear disconcerting resemblance to dusty religious icons, the first a dangling cruciform, another web-hooded and lit like a Madonna—as if we have wandered into a perverse Alien shrine. The marines feel at home with plastic, metal, glass, but are utterly bewildered when they arrive at this womb-tomb, an organic and female interior. Finally, it is significant that the arrival of an Alien is often preceded by silence and then the sound of dripping water, as opposed to the buzzers, guns, welding torches, and clicking machines which are the human defense against this natural creature, motivated only by hunger and the urge to reproduce herself.

The Alien other, I believe, quite literally embodies woman’s reproductive powers. She arouses primal anxieties about woman’s sexual organs and in her combination of multiple tentacles and oozing jaws is the phallic mother of nightmare. The band of marines who enter her vagina, then her womb (which is also a catacomb cluttered with bony human refuse), with all their fire power and ejaculatory short bursts of guns, are ineffectual and insignificant male gametes. The marines are exaggeratedly macho, and this boastful maleness is only underscored by the female marines’ adoption of butch haircuts, muscle flexing, and a swaggering that says, “I can outfight, outswear, outfuck a man any day of the week.” Sexual impersonation here derides masculinity itself as an impersonation, while the Alien impersonates no one but herself. Catastrophe is first checked, then precipitated by the explosion of guns, suggesting that the male penetrates the female at considerable peril.

Only a few members of this “crack squad of commandos” survive to retreat from the Alien’s labyrinth, and they are limp and unmanned by their efforts. The most macho of the males are imprisoned—the black, cigar-smoking “Sarge” and Rambo Drake who epitomizes Marine bravery in his overconfidence in superior strength and fire power. Another grunt, Hudson, who likes to flex the muscle between his ears by insultling his fellow marines, particularly the women, survives, but his male bravado turns to little-boy hysteria, abated only by Ripley’s firm, “Calm down.” Indeed, the only marines who emerge from Big Mama’s vagina dentata with “frosty” aplomb are Vasquez, a fiery Chicana who knows she is tougher than her male comrades in arms, and Hicks, a “liberated” male who admires Ripley’s existential guts over her femininity and eventually teaches her how to use a gargantuan rapid-fire gun.

The major confrontation of the film, in fact, will not be impotent male marines vs. Alien Big Mama, but between Ripley, a woman who practices the maternal as compassionate care vs. a biological-maternal principle of monstrous proportions, embodied in the Alien other. Ripley is a fierce protectress of Newt, promising her own death if need be to save the girl from the Alien Mama. There are three fights to save Newt, each more suggestive than the last of Ripley’s maternal heroism. The first, already mentioned, occurs in the lab. Ripley and Newt
are sleeping under a bed where Newt has curled up tightly like a fetus, and Ripley gently hugs her to her tummy. Ripley awakens, realizes both that Alien lab specimens are loose and that her gun has been locked outside the lab. With Hudson and Hicks’s intervention, the lab specimens are destroyed and Ripley and Newt saved from surrogate motherhood for Aliens.

The second confrontation is revelation—a face-to-face meeting of Ripley with the primal Mother Alien. Up to this moment in the film, battles with the Alien have been with Big Mama’s proliferating brood, not with the dam herself. Nor has director Cameron permitted the audience a good long look at the Alien. Newt has been lost, captured by the Alien in a watery basement to the complex. Though Ripley has only fifteen minutes to retrieve Newt before a nuclear reactor explosion, she decides to return to a dark, wet netherworld where Newt’s homing device (a gift from Ripley) indicates she is still alive. Ripley first finds the homing device, no longer strapped to Newt, and in her one weak moment of the film, begins to weep, believing that she has failed in her promise to save Newt. Still alive, but cocooned in the Alien’s web, Newt screams, spurring Ripley to action. She pulls Newt loose and burns an opening egg. What follows is the scariest sequence of the film. Ripley and Newt (and the audience) suddenly realize that they are walking through a passage land-mined with follicles and eggs. Their first sight of Mama Alien is of her dropping another egg from a gauzy tube that extends from her belly. When they look up, an enormous Alien mother hisses back, jaws dripping and ready to strike. Initially Ripley reacts as if they have violated an animal mother’s lair, quietly and calmly stepping backward, as if to say, “I won’t bother you and your eggs, if you won’t bother me and my child.” Indeed, a nonverbal agreement is struck between these two protective mothers. The truce is broken, however, when another egg opens up and Ripley burns it. The Alien Mama screeches in fury and charges, while simultaneously, Ripley appears to have lost all control, torching every Alien egg in sight. The Alien Mama wrenches her body out of its egg-laying mode to pursue Ripley. Her polymorphic form shattered, the Alien is now a single enemy entity. This whole episode firmly establishes and sets up, for a final showdown still to come, the mother vs. mother nature of the conflict.

Ripley returns to the Alien planet for this epic confrontation, chiefly, it seems, because of traumatic nightmares about giving birth to an Alien. Early in the film, we are given images of Ripley’s bulging stomach, and then we see her waking in a sweaty labor from this frightening birth. In this cinematic trick, we believe dream to be reality, and the film thereby enacts an unthinkable horror, the potential birth of Alien otherness in Ripley’s body. If this is the fear she wishes to defeat in her return—a fear of giving birth—coupled with a ferocious determination to protect Newt, and defending her twice from impregnation-implantation, then *Aliens*’ story pivots around a feminist *guérillière* doing battle with the premise that female anatomy is destiny. Interpretation admittedly goes somewhat wild here in its possible directions. Is Ripley as feminist opposed to man’s technological colonization of woman’s body—embryo implantation, *in vitro* fertilization, the cloning of babies? All of these antiscientific possibilities seem embedded in her enmity for the Alien. Except that the Alien, to this viewer, is stunningly limited by her instincts. She is juicy femaleness, nature gone wild, not technology gone awry.

What is so disturbing about this film from a feminist perspective, then, is its extreme opposition of two kinds of maternal nurture: the instinctual and biological in the Alien, and the conscious, chosen, cultural motherhood of Ripley. Ripley softens her tough, cool demeanor when she first holds Newt in her arms. Finding a photo of Newt celebrating her second-grade citizenship award, she seems shaken by the girl’s violated childhood. Later, she appeals to Newt’s own incipient maternal impulses, comparing her desire to assuage Newt’s fears to Newt’s own efforts to console her doll Casey. (Newt tells Ripley that it’s not the same, since Casey is only plastic and not subject to the nightmares Newt has.) The photo of Newt also provides her real name, Rebecca, and Rebecca’s neat, smiling image contrasts sharply with Newt’s unkempt wild-child appearance, reminding the audience of the possible reduction to savagery if children are left motherless. The marine doctor, also a woman, examines Newt and pronounces her okay phys-
ically, but it is Ripley who washes her face, whose tenderness elicits speech. What all of this suggests in the character of Ripley is a complete dissociation of the maternal principle from woman's biology. Even the seemingly extraneous detail about Newt's plastic doll Casey suggests an artificed, manufactured, woman-made rather than woman-born principle. Ripley chooses to mother; she is not programmed as female by nature to nurture others.

Before celebrating this new feminist wisdom about mothering, let me describe the showdown between Ripley and the Alien. In this final battle, Ripley is less a woman than a cyborg. She has, and it makes the audience love her, beckoned the Alien away from Newt, offering herself as maternal sacrifice: "Take me, not my girl." Ripley disappears and returns with gear that makes her a robot. Like the transformers ubiquitous in the children's toy market, Ripley is now inorganic machine, a combination crane and forklift, screaming, "Get away from her, you bitch!" After an intense battle where the Alien still seems indomitable because of her agility compared to Ripley's clumsy machinery, victory is achieved when Ripley flushes Mama out of an open hatch. I do not think it is straining analysis to see this as a technological disembodiment of the maternal principle from the female body, a feminist symbol for the repression of the female body altogether. Technology's virtue is emphasized by the android Bishop's assistance. He has only half a body left from the ravages of the Alien, yet he manages to hang on to Newt, who is nearly sucked out with the Alien into space. The other survivor, the marine Hicks, seems a more likely comrade in this fight to save humanity, but he is notably out of sight. The slight hint that Ripley-Hicks-Newt form a future nuclear family is ultimately stymied by the film's depiction of female sexuality. Woman's reproductive power is conventionally sanctioned within the bounds of family. In Aliens, this power is displaced in the Alien Mama and therefore represented as completely out of bounds, beyond civilization's controlling institutions.

Therefore, despite a wish to praise this revision of mothering as a cultural choice—a humanizing and civilizing impulse that makes Ripley heroic—I cannot. Because simultaneously, I want to ask why the female body must be represented with such primal terror, such intense repugnance, and why it needs to be so resoundingly defeated, sucked into the vacuum of space as if thrown back into whatever imaginative void could have germinated such horror. If the terrors of the film are, as I've tried to indicate, grounded in archetypal fears of woman's otherness, her alien body and its natural functions, no amount of physical abuse, fire power, and nuclear explosions will provide an audience with psychological catharsis. This is the final horror of the film. There is no reassurance in its closing images of Ripley and Newt, sleeping peacefully in their capsules. They look like Snow White (Ripley has earlier been sarcastically dubbed "Snow White" by the fiery Vasquez for her frigidity), whose female sexuality may be awakened by a kiss, unleashing the power of the Alien other yet again. One might even recall here the other sleeping females of the film—the quiescent lab specimens, drifting in liquid sleep, but ready to strike when the glass tube shatters.

Woman's reproductive capacity is a potential threat, not only to woman herself—to Ripley and the younger version of herself, Newt—but also, it is implied, to civilization, technological progress, the futuristic world depicted in Aliens. This world is peopled principally by young or vigorously middle-aged Company employees. Newt almost seems anomalous: so there still are families, near-relations who care for one another? Ripley, except for her new maternalism, is an existential atom. She has slept for fifty-seven years when the film opens, which might explain her apparent isolation, but she also never expresses anguish or even interest about her past on earth, the people whom she might have cared for or who might have cared for her, now dead and lost in the years of space sleep. In this futuristic world, furthermore, nuclear explosions seem to be less threatening than the Alien other. Ripley, Newt, Bishop, and Hicks are barely off the planet when their ship is rocked by nuclear explosion, but they feel "safe" at last. The Company has technologies for making a planet's atmosphere livable for humans, so we might assume that science can solve every problem, except those created by female biology, by the Alien other in our own nature.
For this reason, _Aliens_ is likely to generate an _Aliens III_ in which culture again is pitted against nature, figured as female and maternal, a womb-tomb that threatens to engulf everyone in the limitations of our bodies, our creatureliness, our biological functions. The character of Newt, on the verge of sexual maturity, can be saved only temporarily from the dangers lurking in her female body. Her potential danger is hinted at in the nickname “Newt”—another word for salamander, linking the girl to the Alien’s slimy animality and femininity. “Newt” may also be understood as short for “neutral,” too young to be sexually threatening. From my own feminist perspective, the relationship of Ripley and Newt is dangerously attractive in the way it revises the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the story of a mother who descends into Hades to save her daughter from the dark netherworld of Dis, the male god who rapes Persephone and makes her his queen. A faint echo of this myth can be heard in Hudson’s exclamation, “We’re going down to hell!” when the marines first land on the Alien planet. The classical myth, however, celebrates female fertility and a mother-daughter relationship based on biology as well as sentiment. Demeter makes a deal with Dis: for six months of the year, autumn and winter, nature will die as Demeter mourns for her daughter’s captivity. They will be reunited in joy and seasonal renewal, spring and summer, the other six months. Ripley is no fertility goddess, but an antifertility mother, and the Alien other is not a rapist male god, but the female body’s reproductive powers. Hence the film’s overt feminism, highly praised in the reviews’ discussion of Sigourney Weaver as Ripley, is a feminism in service to technology over nature, with woman’s intelligence and emotions firmly Alien-ated from her body.

. . . complete symbiosis” with “the oral mother of masochism”—“first environment and agent of control.” In addition, she notes that “the promise of blissful reincorporation into the mother’s body . . . is also a threat.” Obviously the Alien Mama is principally a threat of cruel devortion, but one that exerts a fatal charm for audiences. She may well embody the masochist’s principal fantasy of a “symbiotic reunion with the idealized maternal rule. The masochist imagines the final triumph of a parthenogenetic rebirth from the mother” (p. 271).

2. Studlar describes Dietrich’s _femme fatale_ in Von Sternberg’s films as not solely the sexual object of a male gaze, “but also the holder of a ‘controlling’ gaze that turns the male into an object of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’,” hence asserting, as “the mother of plenitude,” “her ‘presence and her power’” (p. 273). Notably in _Aliens_, only another female, another “mother” like Ripley, is capable of returning the Alien’s gaze without being paralyzed into inaction or turning into a blubbing infant like most of the males in the film.

3. I am referring here to Nancy Chodorow’s _Mothering_ in Feminism: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) and Dorothy Dinnerstein’s _The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise_ (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). Both Chodorow and Dinnerstein argue that women learn to mother, that mothering is not an instinctual urge, and that the strictures of gender roles might be broken to the benefit of everyone if men were to share in the nurturing tasks of raising children. Pertinent to my argument is Chodorow’s careful separation of the biological from the social dimensions of mothering. As Chodorow notes, “Being a mother, then, is not only bearing a child—it is being a person who socializes and nurtures” (p. 11). Ripley’s characterization has elicited praise from critics for its combination of feminist and maternal virtues; yet Ripley might be seen as offering reassurance to audiences that “liberated” women will choose to mother even if they do not choose to give birth. _Aliens_ would be a more feminist film perhaps if Ripley were a man.

4. As Studlar notes, in masochistic fantasies invoking the oral mother, she “assumes all symbolic functions,” and quoting Deleuze, “‘The father is nothing . . . he is deprived of all symbolic function’” (p. 271).

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**NOTES**

1. Gaylyn Studlar, in “Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema,” _Quarterly Review of Film Studies_, 9 (Fall, 1984), 267–282, aligns film voyeurism (spectatorial pleasure) with a masochism embedded in the infant’s pre-Oedipal relationship to the mother. Although Studlar does not concern herself with the peculiar and painful pleasures of horror films, her psychoanalysis (derived from Gille Deleuze) of audiences’ ambivalent fascination with cinematic _femmes fatales_ is suggestive of the Alien’s psychic power over her victims both within the film and in the audience. The pre-Oedipal child in all of us, Studlar argues, longs for “re-fusion