

THE HUNTER IN THE DARK: A FORMAL ANALYSIS OF LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR AND SURREALIST STYLE IN *ALIEN*(1979)

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Abstract :

Mankind's fascination for the black recesses of space and all that hides within that infinite darkness is a subject of perennial curiosity. It is this curiosity in its most terrifying aspect that has been captured so brilliantly in *Alien* (1979). Ridley Scott's cult masterpiece has brought to life the works of H.P.Lovecraft, and has managed to bring together mankind's existential terror and the surreal nature of our universe that is both large and uncaring. This paper focuses on analysing the connection of the film to the philosophy and works of Lovecraft whilst looking at the surrealist style and techniques which have contributed to its enduring success and analyses the style and influence of director Ridley Scott. The conclusion takes a look at the impact of the movie *Alien* on Hollywood cinema, its various adaptations into comics and novels and how the protagonist Ellen Ripley has paved the way for future female action heroes.

Keywords : Alien, Lovecraft, Surreal, Ridley Scott

Introduction

Cinema is a mirror that can change the world – Diego Luna (*de Witt*, 2015)

Film, cinema, movies: seemingly the youngest art form in the world has acquired the status of the most popular of all entertainment media. Not only does it influence culture but it is also influenced by society in turn. The history of cinema owes much of its development to advances in the field of photography. From the production of primitive photographic plates to devices like the kinetograph which created the illusion of motion using successive pictures and the first production of motion pictures by the Lumiere Brothers, the art of film making has grown into one of the most sophisticated and diverse art forms in the world. The dominance of America and its ideals in the cultural, social and political milieu has contributed to the popularity of American films in a world consolidated and shrunken by globalization. A hybridity of form and function has elevated American films to the forefront of innovation. This has resulted in the production of works of particular visual and artistic brilliance.

In addition to advances in the arts, the Industrial Revolution of the early twentieth century was an impetus to a new genre - "science fiction". With a focus on technology, utopian ideals and the future of the human race, "sci-fi" as it was diminutively addressed began as a movement in literature spearheaded by Hugo Gernsback. The visual possibilities of cinema enabled directors to give their own spin to the genre. The German Expressionist film *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) is considered a precursor to science-fiction in films and draws upon the works of famous sci-fi authors like Jules Verne and H.G.Wells. Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) has been the subject of much discussion as it is one of the earliest and most successful adaptations of Lovecraft's chilling vision of horror in film. Though the elements of cosmic horror have been well-documented by critics and viewers, the parallel contributions of surrealist style and the influence of H.R.Giger's artwork in giving Lovecraft's stories new life on screen have yet to be fully explored. Lovecraftian 'Cosmicism' is the axle around which the plot turns and it is the surrealist style that complements and enhances the film's atmosphere of cerebral terror. Lovecraft's works are notoriously difficult

to be translated into visual medium as they are more suggestive of terror and crippling fear than they are visual, whereas film is primarily a visual medium.

Winner of the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects, three Saturn Awards, a Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation and countless other nominations, Ridley Scott's cult masterpiece *Alien* marks a turning point in the history of science-fiction in film and is ranked as the thirty-third greatest film of all time by the Empire Magazine.

As a thrilling and an atmospheric tour-de-force, *Alien* takes place in a distant future aboard the commercial space-freighter Nostromo. Carrying its sleeping crew and a cache of raw ore bound for Earth, the ship is alerted to a strange alien signal from the nearby planetoid of LV-426. The ship's supercomputer (nicknamed 'Mother') awakens the crew who are then forced to land and investigate the ruins of an eerie alien ship. A crew member, Kane, is then attacked by a creature which emerges from a host of eggs and later "births" a horrific alien monster. Shocked by his violent death and in fear of their lives, the crew (comprising of Lambert, Ripley, Parker and the android Ash) tried to defend themselves and eliminate the threat. In the claustrophobic and maze-like innards of the Nostromo, the deadly creature picks off the crew one by one, leaving lieutenant Ellen Ripley to fight and escape from the horror of dying and worse - being used as a host for new spawn. It is Ripley who discovers the nefarious plans of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation who schemed to use the creature as a biological weapon while expending the lives of the crew who were supposed to unwittingly bear the creature to Earth. Through sheer grit and her wits, Ripley manages to blast the alien out of an airlock and earns herself the place of one of the first female sci-fi action heroes. Cosmic horror, surrealist style and psychosexual anxiety all play an important part in the film's thematic repertoire.

Alien was Sir Ridley Scott's second venture after his directorial debut in *The Duellists* (1977). The resounding success of the movie catapulted him to fame and his filmography has come to include other gems such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Gladiator* (2000) and *The Martian* (2015). He is a stylistic director whose approach "has a precedent in German Expressionist film making" as noted by Susan Doll (Doll, 1986). As an auteur however, Scott has been vigorously criticised for his emphasis on style over characterisation as his movies often look and sound amazing but lack a proper connection to characters (who may be aloof or somewhat withdrawn.)

Although *Alien* was critically-acclaimed and deemed commercially successful, it was panned by several critics for its depiction of gross, explicit violence and disturbing content with sexual overtones. Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun Times even dismissed it perfunctorily as a mere "intergalactic haunted house thriller" (*Take 2: Invasion of the Outer Space Movies*. 7:51 – 7:55.) He later went on to include it in his Great Movies collection with the following elucidation:

A few more ambitious and serious sci-fi films have also followed in the footsteps of *Alien*, notably the well-made *Aliens* (1986) and *Dark City* (1988). But the original still vibrates with a dark and frightening intensity. (Ebert, 2003)

The relevance of *Alien* and its dark, unsettling themes echo down from one century to the next, demanding to be heard. As a cinematic classic, it has achieved universal fame amongst the cinema audience and critics alike.

COSMIC DREAD – THE LOVECRAFTIAN INFLUENCE IN ALIEN (1979)

We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity and it was not meant that we should voyage very far. (Lovecraft, *The Classic Horror Stories*, 24)

Much of the success of *Alien* is dependent upon the slow and cerebral nature of the film. The languorous revelation of the title credits accompanied by the distinctive metallic chattering background music is set against the silhouette of a planet. It creates a feeling of deep unease at the onset of the film. Scott's distinctive revelatory style is also present in the measured exposition of the Nostromo ship - half Gothic with its soaring towers and dreary hallways and decidedly futuristic in appearance. From the onset of the film, the

crew are rendered insignificant by their surroundings – a prominent feature of the cosmic horror that pervades the film.

This atmospheric tension is maintained even during the crew's visit to LV426 to investigate the source of the signal that awoke them. As Captain Dallas, Kane and Lambert navigate the dizzying fog and sleet of the alien landscape, they find that their torches are barely able to pierce the darkness. Even as Lambert voices her disquiet upon seeing the vast alien ship, Dallas only says: "We must go on!" (*Alien* 26:41 – 26:43). It is this insatiable curiosity that drives man, sometimes to his own destruction. The strange and warped design of the 'spaceship' is meant to distort and disorient the viewer. It stands in stark contrast to the humans and they are completely dwarfed by it. This is a metaphor for the vast and incomprehensible universe that lies beyond our reach.

According to popular opinion, the death of Kane (played by John Hurt) is what makes the *Alien* film so iconic and memorable. It is not merely because of the shock factor or the excellent depiction of body horror but the sheer violation of bodily integrity and the horrific nature of the Xenomorph's reproductive methods. The alien is caught only in shockingly brief shots. In a terrifyingly short space of time it matures and changes into an even greater predator and the sheer awfulness of its aspect and speed render the unfortunate Brett and Dallas as victims. As critic Roger Ebert noted:

Because it doesn't play by any rules of appearance or behaviour, it becomes an amorphous menace, haunting the ship as a spectre of shape-shifting evil. (Ebert, 2003)

The worried Ripley uncovers a secret protocol in Mother's file system. Dubbed "Special Order 937", the message reveals that the *Nostromo's* parent organization Weyland-Yutani was perfectly aware of the organism's existence and planned to extract it to Earth. The crew members are merely expendables. A horrified Ripley is then attacked by Ash. With the help of Parker and Lambert, she manages to fight and 'kill' him. Ash is revealed to be an android - human only in appearance but mechanical in nature. This horrifying discovery is underscored in the scene where Ripley reanimates the android's head to ask him questions. Ash reveals that he deliberately orchestrated the entry of the creature onto the ship. Of the creature he expresses only admiration and says: "Perfect organism...its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility...a survivor, unclouded by conscience, remorse or the delusions of morality." (*Alien*, 1:24:25 – 1:24:32)

This revelation is highly symbolic. The crew are forsaken by their own kind and left as sacrifices to some awful alien presence; semi-divine in its unseen and yet potent presence in the *Nostromo*. Humanity is outnumbered and overwhelmed, utterly insignificant and adrift in an uncaring universe. The *Nostromo* is now a death-trap and we see how the protagonists absorb that awful revelation.

The screenplay for *Alien* was written by Dan O'Bannon, with contributions from Ronald Shusett. It is the slow pacing and existential dread evoked in the film that makes it stand out from contemporaries and even from other films within the *Alien* franchise. It is the scriptwriter Dan O'Bannon who provided the foundation of "cosmic horror" in the film. Cosmic horror is also known by various other epithets such as "Lovecraftian horror" and "existential horror".

O'Bannon's fascination with the writings of Howard Philips Lovecraft began in his early teens. The influence of Lovecraft can be clearly seen in *Alien*. The setting, story and events pay homage to Lovecraft and his philosophy of "Cosmicism".

H.P. Lovecraft is one of the most significant authors in the early twentieth century movement of "Weird Fiction". Unrecognized during his lifetime, Lovecraft attained posthumous fame in his homeland of America and beyond. His most famous creation is the "Cthulhu Mythos" - a universe in which ancient alien beings of immense power frequently come into conflict with helpless humans. Lovecraft and Edgar Allen Poe have been incredibly influential and are referenced often in pop culture. A contemporary example of Lovecraft's influence in pop culture is contained in the animated cartoon show *Ben 10*; the show's primary antagonist is Vilgax who bears a striking resemblance to the 'Ancient One' Cthulhu, a malignant entity mentioned in many of Lovecraft's stories. **Lovecraftian Cosmicism** lays out the penalties of accessing forbidden knowledge, the dangers of esoteric knowledge and how such knowledge can drive men to madness.

The insignificance of man and mankind in the face of a hostile universe are frequent themes in works such as *The Colour Out of Space* and *At the Mountains of Madness*.

The crew of the *Nostromo* are pitifully weak in the face of the Xenomorph. Like the protagonist of *The Colour out of Space*, Ripley must navigate around a faceless, nameless threat that defies explanation and science. Like the alien 'colour' in the story, the Xenomorph too corrupts and destroys everything it comes into contact with. The works of Lovecraft emphasise the transient nature of human effort. The alien not only violates the bodies of its victims but also their surroundings.

Another important feature of Cosmicism is the motif of 'Promethean' knowledge. The Greek legend states that Prometheus stole fire (also symbolic of knowledge and enlightenment) from the gods to give to humans. He was punished for all eternity to have his liver plucked out and eaten by an eagle. Similarly, humans who seek out forbidden knowledge are invariably driven to madness. In *Alien*, this theme is most clearly seen in Lambert, who is rendered emotionally unstable and volatile. In her final moments, she is catatonic with terror at the sight of the alien and cannot hear Parker's pleas to flee. She was part of the expedition to the alien ship. Her slow descent into terror begins with her witnessing the death of Kane as the larval alien emerges from his body. George Gammell Angell in Lovecraft's *Call of Cthulhu* narrates how his crewmates were driven mad by the sight of the Great God Cthulhu whom they unwittingly released.

The 'horror' in Cosmicism does not arise from supernatural elements but from the chilling hostility of a wholly natural cosmos. Science and Nature can be tools for progress but can also channel the unthinkable and unpredictable forces of the universe and so cause mayhem and destruction. In *Alien*, Ash the android turns against the humans and so does the ship's computer; ironically-named "Mother". Humanity's own creations have betrayed them. The Weyland-Yutani corporation's desire to use the alien as a biological weapon signifies man's innate capacity for violence. Just as we turned eagerly on one another with tanks and nuclear weapons in the World Wars, so too does the Corporation seek a military edge over perceived enemies. Ridley Scott and Dan O'Bannon have shown that technology can advance but also destroy our race - a key aspect of Cosmicism.

One of the most controversial parts in Lovecraft's writing is his antagonistic view of other races and racial miscegenation. In *The Horror of Red Hook*, he uses slurs and derogatory language to describe 'non-white' peoples. In the *Shadow Over Innsmouth* he creates a race of horrific alien-human hybrids which, in the words of Lovecraft scholar and biographer S.T.Joshi, epitomise his fear of "genetic degradation" (qtd in Slatten, 18.) This same instinct of grotesque horror is present in *Alien* - the Xenomorph itself is the product of an unholy union between human and alien.

Rather than xenophobia however, the emphasis is on the annihilation of humanity, the highlighting of the basest, most primal instincts of man as symbolised by the Xenomorph. It is born of mankind's darkest nightmares and repressed violence, a triumph of bestiality over humanity. The only flaw in Weyland-Yutani's plan is the unprecedented strength and initiative shown by Ellen Ripley. She is akin to the rare protagonists in Lovecraftian stories who fight and conquer the evil that assails them instead of being driven mad or dying. Ripley greatly resembles the protagonist of *Mountains of Madness*, Dr. William Dyer in both technical knowledge and courage. Ripley's defeat of the Xenomorph is telling because it reinforces the strength and determination of one woman who, by extension, represents the very best of humanity. Ripley is an authentic heroine, one who asserts herself in the face of despair and triumphs over her extraordinary circumstances.

ON SURREALISM – THE STYLE AND TECHNIQUES EMPLOYED

Ridley Scott is remembered as a painstakingly thorough director with a marvellous eye for detail. His dedication to developing and perfecting the mise-en-scene, the world inside the camera-view, of *Alien* has contributed greatly towards its enduring success. However, the main influence on the art and atmosphere of the film is actually the Swedish surrealist artist Hans Ruedi Giger. His bizarre juxtapositioning of man and machine and infusion of sexually transgressive imagery is what makes the film truly stand out. To understand *Alien*, we must look at the aspects of surrealist art and themes that come into play in the movie as well as Scott's own contribution to the style of the film.

In the early twentieth century, the bloody aftermath of World War One left artists adrift in a stricken world. Strife and economic hardship made life unbearable for thousands. Anti-capitalist, anti-logic and anti-aestheticism marked the emergence of the "Dadaist" movement in art. Theirs was a worldview marked by cynical contempt for the morals and values of Western Civilisation and the horrific conflict engendered by those ideals. They were ironically "anti-art" and distanced themselves from realism. The Surrealist movement was born out of Dadaist contempt and mockery of reality. Its hub was Paris, France. The word "surrealism" was first coined by Guillaume Apollinaire in March 1917. By 1929 two groups emerged as rival surrealists, claiming to be the successors of a revolution launched by Apollinaire. One group was led by Yvan Goll whilst the other was helmed by André Breton.

The manifesto of the Surrealist movement was published in 1924 by writer André Breton. Breton spoke of the need to surpass reality, to bring forth a union of what is experienced in reality and what is unconsciously felt in our minds. Reality had failed humanity, so it was the purpose of surrealism to create another kind of reality, one which surpassed the present. One of the main techniques used was a juxtaposition of bizarre or opposing images that evoked confusion, uneasiness or anxiety. Surrealism and the history of filmmaking share similar timelines of development. The visual scope and endless possibilities of cinema enhanced the surrealist attempt to distort and reshape reality into a form where reality and fantasy coexist simultaneously.

It was a chance encounter on the sets of the *Dune* film that led Dan O'Bannon to H.R.Giger. O'Bannon (and later Ridley Scott himself) was thoroughly impressed by Giger's portfolio. In particular, it was the painting *Necronom IV* - which depicted a bizarre humanoid-serpentine figure in monochrome black, grey and brown - that truly cemented the appearance of the alien in Bannon's mind. The design of the alien is itself representative of that "irrational juxtaposition" that surrealists so prized. It is humanoid but twisted and distorted. Giger's hallmark as an artist was his ability to fuse man and machine into eerie and unsettling poses and tableaux. In works such as *Birth Machine* and *Erotomechanics 6* the same traits can be seen. Giger coined the term "biomechanical" to describe his art. It is unclear whether it is the human being consumed by the machine or the machine which is evolving human characteristics. The works convey a sense of bestial, mechanical coldness. Giger too was deeply influenced by Lovecraft and also by Salvadore Dali and the Montenegrin Surrealist artist Miodrag 'Dado' Duric. Dado's use of "glaring light and colored shadows" (Giger, 1997) is of particular influence to Giger. One collection of his works is named *Necronomicon* after the occult tome mentioned in Lovecraft's stories. Cosmicism has had an undeniable influence in Giger's art. The eerie anxiety that Lovecraft strove to evoke in his works is reflected and enhanced by Giger's bizarre and sometimes disturbing art. Lovecraft was fond of describing things which had alien symmetry and unsettling angles and these elements too find their visual counterpart in the *Necronomicon* collection.

Sigmund Freud's *On the Interpretation of Dreams* was a great influence on the Surrealist manifesto. His theory about the influence of the "unconscious" mind was adopted by Surrealist painters and writers, particularly in the style of "automatic writing". Surrealists sought to channel the dreamlike and fantastic impulses of the 'unconscious'. Giger also brought forth the perverse sexual desires that lie dormant in the minds of men. Freudian psychoanalysis placed emphasis on "phallic" imagery in dreams. The Xenomorph is androgynous in body but its head and tail in the original design have protruding 'phallic' elements which connote sexual organs. The eggs in the ship and the Facehugger both resemble the vaginal openings (vulva) of women. Freudian sexual symbolism is rampant in H.R.Giger's work. The 'repressed' and unconscious fears that the audience carries are projected into the form of the Xenomorph who resists and defies control or explanation.

Following this logic, the grotesque assault on Kane assumes overtones of sexual assault. Though the idea of rape is usually associated with men assaulting women, here it is a man being forcefully 'impregnated' by something which appears feminine. Dan O'Bannon remarked that this was a form of "homosexual oral rape" (qtd in C.Gallardo and Jason Smith, 37) and was meant to make the male audience uncomfortable for they had to experience the taboo nature of witnessing a man being - somewhat literally - 'raped' by 'penetration'. The creature born of this 'rape' is androgynous in form but dominated by phallic symbolism (manifested in the elongated head, double jaws and erect tail.) The phallus represents masculine virtues such as force and dominance but here it is subverted to violence and sexual transgression that evokes revulsion and

anxiety in the viewer. Thus, the human act of sexual intercourse is perverted and the violent, bestial side of it is brought out.

The alien itself was first created by moulding the frame from bone, and plaster before being cast in rubber. The stuntman who wore the suit was a six-foot ten Nigerian student named Bolaji Badejo whose frame and thinness made him a suitable mimic for the grace and speed of the alien. Since the suit would be too obvious in long shots, the alien is only shown in brief glimpses. Animatronic design was used by designer Carlo Rambaldi in the headpiece of the alien, to simulate the movement of the double jaw. Giger personally designed the suit and the alien spaceship on LV-426. Here too, his "biomechanical" imagery comes into play as the ship looks as if it was 'grown' or fused into a machine.

Although thoroughly cynical and violent in both mood and theme, *Alien* is also a magnificently conceptualised and well-executed piece of art. The surrealist influence in style complements the chilling Lovecraftian atmosphere of the film and further draws in viewers.

CONCLUSION

Since it first loped onto the silver screen, the Xenomorph in Ridley Scott's *Alien* has prowled across the decades and managed to become even more terrifying with age. When Lovecraft wrote of eternally slumbering aliens hidden in plain sight, he could not have imagined that his ideas would be so accurately represented in the shape of the Xenomorph and its unsuspecting victims. So well-known is this alien that it has inspired countless adaptations into other art forms like comics, books and even movies. It is this influence of Lovecraftian Cosmicism that has lent *Alien* its aura of indefinable menace. The sequels: *Aliens* (1986), *Alien 3* (1992) and *Alien: Resurrected* (1997) lack this same element of horror and surreal style and so remained more traditional sci-fi action thrillers.

By applying the principles of Lovecraftian Cosmicism to *Alien* and looking at the film through the lens of this philosophy, we were able to notice even more striking similarities to Lovecraft's works and not just the elements of Cosmicism. In particular, the novella *Mountains of Madness* has had an indelible influence in the shaping of the plot and also the character of Ellen Ripley. Her conflict with the alien assumes greater significance when viewed in light of the meaninglessness and insignificance of the human race in *Alien*. Through the painstaking work of H.R.Giger and his macabre designs, Lovecraft finds voice in the menacing figure of the Xenomorph. The surrealist juxtaposition of bizarre and disturbing imagery has indubitably contributed to the atmosphere of chilling and indefinable menace that is the hallmark of Lovecraftian horror.

Giger's "biomechanical" surrealist style has had an incredible impact on other sci-fi and horror movies. He brought his unsettling visions to bear in his design for Roger Donaldson's sci-fi horror film *Species*. Giger's penchant for mixing sexual imagery with unsettling bestiality is reflected in the alien-human hybrid "Sil" who assumes the form of a young, attractive woman and whose objective is to mate with men in order to produce more alien-hybrid offspring. Like the Xenomorph in *Alien*, Sil too leaves a trail of senseless destruction in her wake as she tries to fulfil an unstoppable urge to reproduce. Giger's surrealist style and his fusion of alien, robotic and human characteristics in design have been imitated in various films, and he has had a profound influence on American filmmaking. His oeuvre captures the dreamlike, fantastic and insanity-inducing atmosphere of Lovecraftian Cosmicism with ease. In *Alien*, Giger's work has ensured that the terror, unease and revulsion only enhance the Lovecraftian theme that underlies the plot of the movie and has immortalised the alien in the minds of the viewers.

Apart from its legacy in film, *Alien* has also made its mark in various adaptations to print. 'Adaptation' refers to adapting elements from one work of art to another medium. Literary adaptations have enabled filmmaking to adopt some of the respectability that came with the art of writing. For a film to spawn literary adaptations, that film must be exceptional both in style and in content.

However, the most significant impact made by *Alien* is how it introduced one of the first popular female sci-fi action heroes. Ellen Ripley and Terminator's Sarah-Connor have paved the way for more realistic and nuanced portrayal of woman in fiction and in action-thrillers. For Scott, the idea that a woman could survive such an ordeal was itself ground-breaking as previous female characters in science fiction were not particularly impressive or independent when compared to the male protagonist. As a woman engineer, competent with a variety of weapons and technology she also breaks the stereotypes of the "damsel in distress" or the "doting partners" whose role is mostly passive. This was Weaver's breakthrough role and she became only the second actress in the horror genre to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress. Ellen Ripley's steadiness and ingenuity are contrasted with Lambert's hysterics and panic – a symbol of the more 'traditional' female personality in film. Ripley fuses compassion with a hardened practicality. As the ultimate maternal figure she is compassionate, fierce, broken but unbent and self-sacrificing. Where the Xenomorph represents perversion of humanity and bestial instinct, Ripley creates and preserves. She represents the best of humanity and by extension, the best of women.

By looking at the film through the lens of Lovecraftian Cosmicism, this paper has established the film's underlying themes of existential horror. The surrealist influence in style, through the work of Hans Ruedi Giger has also been explored. Not only is *Alien* one of the forerunners of Lovecraftian Cosmicism in film, it has also contributed one of the most memorable female protagonists in the history of film.

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