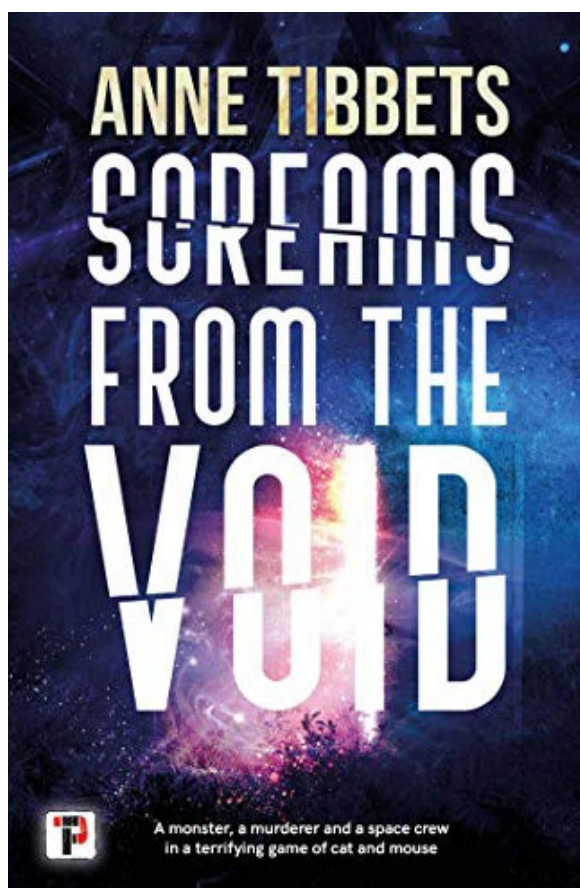


# Horror as Social Critique

Violence Against Women in *Alien* and *Screams from the Void*

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 Anne Tibbets  
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Literary Gothic and cinematic horror are closely intertwined, like webbing that continuously spreads to encompass the expanse of fears within the human experience. Scholars of both genres discuss ways that Gothic and horror expose the problem of cultural inequity to invite the audience into a discourse on these issues. In the literary realm, prominent Gothic scholar Fred Botting places Gothic works at the forefront of social critique. Botting writes that the Gothic conveys “social and domestic fears” associated with the transgression of laws and boundaries and that in the plot’s resolution, the authors reassert the audience’s identity and sense “of justice, morality and social order” regarding their “values [on] society, virtue and property” (7). According to horror scholar Jennifer Selway, the same is true for “horror films [that] draw on deep-seated fears and desires” (ix) where fears about the “other,” race, gender, religion, class, biology, psychology, technology, and the supernatural or paranormal can be safely explored. From *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) to *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975), from *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) to *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), and from *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) to *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011), horror can be a catalyst for discussions about social concerns.

Gothic novels and horror films are so interconnected that they have become symbiotic. In cinema’s infancy, literary texts were being adapted into films; therefore, it is not surprising that there are newly published novels that have been shaped by landmark cinematic works. Ridley Scott’s 1979 science fiction horror film *Alien* is an example of such a groundbreaking production that has become a touchstone in popular culture. Set in 2122, a crew of seven must battle a deadly alien. Because *Alien* is set on a commercial spacecraft in a time when space travel has become commonplace, the film can also be considered a workplace horror. In the literary realm, one cannot read Anne Tibbets’s fifth novel, *Screams from the Void* (2021), without



Fig. 1 | Ripley aggressively questions Ash in *Alien*, 01:20:13. Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.

noticing its tributes to *Alien*. Set in 2231, the novel opens in medias res, where a crew of thirteen on a botany expedition must also face a deadly alien. In addition to the primal terror of being slaughtered by a “foreign biological,” both works also explore women’s fears of being sexually assaulted. These anxieties remain with women everywhere: in public, in their homes, and even in the workplace. There is no location in which women are completely safe.

In *Alien* and in *Screams from the Void*, there is a pivotal scene where a male colleague physically assaults the female protagonist, actualizing women’s deep-seated fears of their personal safety being violated. The circumstances of these attacks and the crew’s responses to them deepen the horror of the protagonists’ situations. Both works include scenes that demonstrate what, in horror films Matt Glasby labels as “The Unexpected,” which “refers to the many ways horror films seek to surprise us, from jump scares to plot twists” (10). While *Alien*’s birth scene is one of the most recognized in cinematic history, it is Ash’s (Ian Holm) assault of Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) that catapults the plot to another level of psychological terror. In *Screams from the Void*, Ensign Morven’s physical and verbal aggression toward Mechanics Ensign Raina, in the crew’s presence, exposes the distressing fact that women continue to be victimized in the workplace. In both works, the women must fight two monsters, while the men only fight one. Using scenes of “The Unexpected,” *Alien* and *Screams from the Void* shed light on violence against women in the workplace to decry the endless reign of the patriarchy and to expose the horror that these social issues are far from over.

The horror of unexpected violence against women occurs in *Alien* when Ash attacks Ripley. The crew of five male and two female crew members interacts as equals, portraying the future as progressively gender-neutral where the patriarchy no longer reigns. However, after Dallas (Tom Skerritt) is slaughtered, Ripley assumes his position as head officer. When Ripley discovers that Ash’s mission is to prioritize the alien’s life over that of the crew, she pushes Ash against a wall and demands answers (Fig. 1).

Her stance is one of authority. She stands over him and pins him against the spacecraft’s walls, forcing him to look up at her. Once the spacecraft and all commands are now made by a woman, the patriarchy reasserts itself. When met with silence, Ripley leaves to inform Lambert (Veronica Cartwright) and Parker (Yaphet Kotto), but Ash systematically locks her out of all the passages, isolates her, and attacks. The violence is sudden, unexpected, and intense. He rips a handful of hair from her head and hurls her against a wall. Bloodied, Ripley flees by crawling on her hands and knees as Ash stalks her, picks her up, and flings her against another wall with such force that it incapacitates her. To reinforce the dominance of the patriarchy, Ash concludes his brutal attack with a sexual assault, an additional primal terror for women that equates with, if not surpasses, physical violence.

The setting in this scene dismantles the illusion of a progressive society where women are treated with equality. In a corner, just off of the kitchen and dining area, rooms traditionally associated with women’s subjection in the domestic realm, there are stacks of pornographic magazines, and the walls



**Fig. 2** | The pornographic images of women on the wall as Ash prepares to assault Ripley in *Alien*, 01:22:26. Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.



**Fig. 3** | Ash orally assaulting Ripley in *Alien*, 01:22:33. Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.

are plastered from ceiling to floor with nude women, all silent observers to her assault (Fig. 2).

Despite the seemingly gender-neutral interpersonal dynamics, the sexual objectification of women clearly remains fully intact. Once Ripley is unconscious and unable to defend herself, Ash stands over her limp body, rolls up a magazine, and forces it down her throat in an attempt to silence and murder her, an act reminiscent of oral rape (Fig. 3). Ripley awakens and frantically claws at Ash's neck to save herself. This scene illustrates the continued sexualization of women in the workplace and that, even in a seemingly progressive society, women are still vulnerable to acts of brutality.

In the second half of the scene, Ripley reasserts her authority and challenges the patriarchy. When Parker and Lambert enter the room, they immediately intervene. Parker uses a fire

extinguisher to repeatedly hit Ash with such power that he is partially decapitated and eventually stops moving. This act exposes Ash's true identity as an android. In a sign of a woman reclaiming her authority, Ripley uses her technological skills to reboot Ash's decapitated head to interrogate him. With Ash's decapitated head and mutilated body on the floor, he is forced into a lowly position that must recognize her dominance (Fig. 4). Ash must look up to Ripley again, this time, from an even lower position of subservience.

Once she has the information she needs, Ripley pulls the plug on Ash, silencing him. She has ultimate control. Ash's destruction conveys a message that patriarchal violence is no longer tolerated in a progressive society, but the full scene is a reminder that the battle for gender equality is still ongoing.

In *Screams from the Void*, the horror of “The Unexpected” also occurs in a scene of violence against women in the workplace. The crew includes men and women in positions of authority, so there is an illusion that gender bias in the workplace is extinct. However, early in the novel, Tibbets establishes that physical and emotional abuse against women is still a regular occurrence, as is society’s tolerance of it. The attack begins when Morven locks Raina outside of a secured room where the alien cannot enter. This act separates Raina from the rest of the crew and leaves her alone and vulnerable to the deadly creature. When another crew member opens the door for her, Raina enters and slaps Morven, who retaliates by attempting to strike her face, but is prevented from making contact when Niall, the head officer, deflects his aim. Despite being surrounded by crewmates who have already shown their willingness to intervene, which should have de-escalated the situation, Morven still charges: “Like a wrecking ball, he plows straight at [Raina], tossing chairs out of his way” (64). As Avram attempts to protect Raina, Morven pushes him across the room, grabs Raina’s arm, “wrenches [it] like a demon,” and demands, in full hearing of the rest of the crew, “Are you fucking *him* now?” (64). The purpose of Morven’s inappropriate and invasive question serves to humiliate and degrade Raina by robbing her of her humanity and reducing her to a sexual object, a view which women have historically fought against.

The terror of *Screams from the Void* comes, not only from the physical and emotional abuse that Raina endures, but also from the authority’s apathy to it. The second half of the scene reasserts the rule of the patriarchy and the subjection and victimization of women. While Morven still holds Raina’s arm, Niall’s only solution is to tell Morven to “stand down” (65) and for everyone to “calm down” (66). While “Niall has one of his rifles powered and aims at Morven’s head” (65), which is likely the only reason that Morven halts his rampage, Niall’s words cause further emotional damage. When other crew members attempt to explain what happened, Niall says, “I don’t care” and “It doesn’t matter” (65). As lead officer, Niall has the authority to reprimand Morven and send the message to the rest of the crew, and to Raina, that such behaviour is unacceptable. Instead, he dismisses the situation and strips Raina of any dignity, trivializing her abuse. This is yet another form of emotional victimization that further subjugates women and



Fig. 4 | The mutilated Ash looking up to Ripley in *Alien*, 01:25:04. Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.

silences them within the patriarchy. Sadly, Raina knows that, “As always, nothing will change. The officers will smooth things over as if nothing is wrong. They’ll placate Raina and take no action against Morven, just like before” (66). There are no consequences for such violence, and there is no justice for the victim, which is the all too common response that adds to the horror of the situation.

One of the most terrifying aspects of the novel and the film is a sense of the isolation and helplessness that women can feel in a workplace that is guided by patriarchal order. The title *Screams from the Void* is reminiscent of the tagline in the original movie poster for *Alien*: “In space no one can hear you scream” (“*Alien*”). When viewed through the lens of aggression against women, these chilling words take on a more sinister tone and remind the audience that no matter how loudly women cry out against the patriarchy, they will not be heard. *Alien* premiered six years after the Roe versus Wade decision when women gained legal autonomy over their bodies and more rights in the workplace. *Screams from the Void* was published 42 years later, in the midst of the #MeToo movement, but only a year before Roe versus Wade was overturned. The futuristic settings in which violence against women transpires fall under Glasby’s final scare tactic, “The Unstoppable,” which “refers to the sense that the traumas we are experiencing will never end” (11). Even though the novel is set 110 years beyond *Alien*, it exposes how distant the world is from true gender equality. These works reveal that, even hundreds of years into the future, patriarchal violence, which has haunted women for thousands of years, is not going anywhere. Little else can be more disturbing and horrifying than that thought. ■

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