

# The Empty Vessel

## Chronicles of the 'Unfed' Womb – Examining Symbolic Female Bodies and the Absence of Bodily Autonomy in *Alien 3*

BY JORDAN REDEKOP-JONES  
Kwantlen Polytechnic University

### ABSTRACT

*Alien 3* (1992) explores what it means to be a woman in horror as defined solely by motherhood and womanhood. Following the devastating loss of maternal relationship between Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and Newt (Carrie Henn) during a crash landing, the protagonist Ripley must navigate the prisoner planet Fiorina 161 as the sole survivor and woman amongst violent convicts placed in isolation from society for their heinous acts against women. Director David Fincher uses a dark, isolated setting to explore the patriarchy's definition of bodily autonomy through the abjection of an unwanted alien pregnancy, the void-like environment of the prison, and the uncontrolled, fast paced violence of the prisoners and 'rogue' alien. This essay seeks to examine the concept of Barbara Creed's 'Monstrous Feminine' as seen through the patriarchy's fear of the parthenogenetic alien queen and the abject womb of Fiorina 161.

Rosemary Betterton argues that "Barbara Creed identified the birthing monster in the *Alien* series as the 'archaic mother' whose alien materiality threatens to engulf human subjects" (81). The alien mother incites great fear in the fictional world of the *Alien* series because of her threat to devastate and destroy humankind through numerous unfertilized pregnancies. Likewise, women who choose to reproduce in American society are treated with similar animosity. Their ability to carry children and the looming fear of parthenogenetic pregnancies, defined as "reproduction from an ovum without fertilization" (*Oxford Languages*), make the patriarchy feel virtually obsolete in childbearing. Thus, their insecurities have driven scholars such as Creed to coin and study the term 'the monstrous feminine' or what refers to "what it is about women that is terrifying, horrific, abject" (27). Under the male gaze, women are feared because of the abject, which Kristeva terms [as] that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules'; that

which 'disturbs identity, system, order'" (Kristeva qtd. in Creed 8). Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), the womb, and monstrous motherhood defy 'the system' because the female body/uterus is something which cannot be controlled even by women themselves. David Fincher's *Alien 3* (1992) reveals the patriarchy's anxiety surrounding women's power, and men's inability to achieve reproduction in the same way. In this film, Ripley's unwanted pregnancy leads her to her own death and destruction not only as a mother figure, but as a woman as well. By looking at the way the female body is appropriated in horror, we can see how bodily autonomy is a source of power for women, and in turn, a source of fear for those who cannot control it. Most importantly, this film depicts patriarchal vexation and disgust as illustrated through the symbolic womb of the prisoner planet and symbolic bodies in general.

The symbolic womb first appears in the destruction and entrapment of the pod's occupants including Newt (Carrie



**Fig. 1** | One of the pods is shattered and Ripley drapes herself over Newt's Pod in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:13:00 and 00:13:17. Brandywine Productions, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 1992.

Henn) in Ripley's ship. After Ripley's attempt to save herself and Newt in the previous film *Aliens* (1986), their pod/ship crash lands on the prison planet Fiorina 161. The first of many painful realities of Ripley's motherhood is Newt's death, even whilst Ripley attempts to keep her safe both in the womb of the pod and during autopsy. Throughout the film, Ripley must face the grief of losing her 'adopted' daughter, as well as the loss of her own bodily autonomy. In Figure 1, one of the pods is shattered, which suggests trauma to the pod as symbolic womb as well as foreshadowing Ripley's own lost 'pregnancy'. The low key lighting presents an interruption to the sacred space of Newt's enclosed pod, which Ripley drapes herself over as if it were a pregnant belly outside of herself, forever stuck in time. Here, the pod is a symbolic womb that was supposed to keep Newt safe from the aliens, even though it ultimately causes her to drown.

Besides the symbolic womb, attention is drawn to Newt's death through an autopsy table's drain, which is symbolic of Newt's rib cage (Fig. 2). Figures 2, 3, and 4 reveal how early on women's bodily autonomy is removed and controlled. Significantly, Newt's autopsy is conducted by a man, Clemens (Charles Dance) though it is closely supervised by Ripley. Newt is being autopsied to check for traces of an alien, though because she is a child, the director does not rely on graphic shots of her bare body and open rib cage to demonstrate the pain of being witness to such a loss. Instead, the drain runs clear one moment in Figure 1, then the camera pans to a knife and returns to a drain that runs red with her blood in Figure 2. It is through this removal of visual horror that viewers are subjected to the auditory cracking of Newt's bones. In Figure 4, Ripley is highlighted in low key lighting with half her face bruised and shadowed in between life and death, as she watches over her adopted daughter, still working to protect her body even in the afterlife. She is evidently in pain at having to remove Newt's bodily autonomy in order to ensure that her corpse has not and will not be used as a vessel for alien life, which is seen later when Ripley demands Newt's cremation in the void.

Furthermore, "*Alien 3* opens upon a scene that displays a new possibility for horror, that of the complete failure of essential motherhood" (Waldrop 37). Arguably, this could be translated to the failure of womanhood itself, as even though Ripley does not give birth to Newt, she cannot save her from the patriarchy as her dead body is surrounded by what Andrews (Brian



**Fig. 2** | Water runs down the drain during Newt's Autopsy in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:16:33. Brandywine Productions/ 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 1992.



**Fig. 3** | Blood enters the drain during Newt's Autopsy in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:16:45. Brandywine Productions/ 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 1992.

Glover) defines as "thieves, rapists, murderers, child molesters" (00:21:04/1:54:00) in an all-male prison. Thus, she demands Newt be cremated so that her corpse is safe from the alien as well as the violent offenders. Figures 2, 3 and 4 are suggestive of menstruation or abortion where a life is symbolically washed down the drain. Even if Newt were alive, she would become a target of the patriarchy as a young girl with reproductive promise in the same way Ripley has reproductive promise for the alien. Later in the film when viewers are reminded that the alien births happen from the chest cavity, it brings attention to the risk pregnancy puts on the female body and the chest as a figurative womb. Symbolically, the cryo tube that Newt is stored in represents the containers where fetuses are stored in science labs, which suggests that Newt was just a fetus herself; her potential lost. In the womb of the cryo tube, Newt was doomed to die due to complications that were beyond her control. Newts are "small slender-bodied [amphibians]" that "typically [spend] [their] adult [lives] on land and [return] to water to breed" (*Oxford Languages*). Her death by drowning (00:16:46/1:54:00) and isolation within her pod represents the



**Fig. 4** | Ripley supervises Newt's autopsy in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:17:31. Brandywine Productions/ 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 1992.



**Fig. 5** | Ripley's nose bleeding in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:24:32. Brandywine Productions/ 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 1992.

control the patriarchy has over young female life. As well, the helplessness that Ripley feels demonstrates this symbolic loss of her child as well as her own bodily autonomy as she later realizes her own role in carrying an alien child. Moreover, it is a reflection on how the 'man-made' synthetic womb will always pale in comparison to a real one.

Notably, references to flowering in the film also contend with motherhood, womanhood and even death. In Figure 5, Ripley's nose bleeds as she watches the bodies of Newt and Corporal Hicks (Michael Biehn) fall into the incinerator. Her nosebleed illustrates a symbolic miscarriage and the isolation of her face in this frame emphasizes how lonely this instance can be. Dillon's (Charles S. Dutton) birth related monologue in this scene incites a contrasting and harrowing image of motherhood. At (00:24:43-00:24:58/1:54:00) when he says "For within each seed, there is a promise of a flower. And within each death, no matter how small, there's always a new life," he foreshadows her pregnancy as Ripley's nose bleeds. This signals first blood: it runs down as menstrual blood might, or a rejected egg implantation, or the painful birth of a newborn baby.

The setting of the film on the planet Fiorina 161 is the first foreshadowing of Ripley's doomed pregnancy. "Fior" means flower in Italian, and by nature refers to springtime: a time of reproduction and blooming of the earth in all forms. Dillon's positioning of women's reproductivity (seeds) as probable mothers (flowers) assumes that birth and motherhood is

natural, expected and beautiful which is divorced from the often painful and abject embodiment of the experience. Thus, suggesting that even Ripley's forced pregnancy and symbolic miscarriage of Newt are acceptable because the patriarchy deems these circumstances as an expected result of womanhood. In the Hebrew dictionary, the number 161 means "to be united" (2023). This is another example of curious foreshadowing in the film considering the clear divide of the prisoners and Ripley at the beginning and their inevitable though fragmented union by the end of the film. The flowering references contrast the image of the prison and the prisoners, in the same way the prisoners' reformed Christianity contrasts the prisoners' heinous acts against women. Dillon as the 'religious' leader of the cult talks of the balance of life in such a way that places him in a godlike position as the ultimate patriarch, watching as the bodies are thrown into "the void." Ripley's presence on the edge of the incinerator as the bodies are dropped into the void as well as Newt's autopsy draw attention to Ripley's role as guardian and supervisor of her adopted child. Even though she is outnumbered by the prisoner occupants of Fiorina 161, she claims her place among them early on in the film in her safekeeping of Newt's body: the one she could save from the aliens but not from death itself.

In this film, the all-male prison serves as a void or dark womb; "a form of "abjection"" (Kristeva qtd. Silver 409). As Kristeva says, the womb is abject because it is uncontrollable, defying societal 'rules' and 'systems' which is mirrored by the violent offenders. The prison hosts Ripley (a woman) and an alien, which are two things the patriarchy is incapable of controlling. In this light, both the alien and Ripley bear witness to each other's isolation, especially when Ripley becomes pregnant with the alien child and is shockingly preserved. As a symbolic womb, the prison serves as a place of development in terms of Ripley's alien pregnancy and in the rehabilitation of its prisoners. Despite their practise of reformed 'Christianity', the fear and hatred of the womb becomes directed towards the only woman present: Ripley. Even "[Miles] points out that in Christian art, hell was often represented as a womb, 'a lurid and rotting uterus' where sinners were perpetually tortured for their crimes (qtd. in Creed 43).

As first incited by the alien queen and exacerbated by Ripley, their fear of women is present "in the film's images of blood, darkness and death," as well as "in the images of birth, the representations of the primal scene, [and] the womb-like imagery" (Creed 19). In Figure 6, the wind tunnel and worker are highlighted in soft, low key lighting symbolizing their "stasis" in the symbolic womb, yet they are attacked by an alien moments later. The fast-paced mutilation of the worker demonstrates the juxtaposition of the "abject" womb as giver of life and even in some cases the cause of death. Therefore, it displays the inherent lack of ostensible safety.

In the symbolic womb of the prison, the high-risk prisoners are held as a result of molesting and killing women. The womb "in Christianity [was] a place of sin where evil was located" (Douglas qtd. in Silver 410). Additionally, it "[is]





Fig. 6 | A worker gets attacked by an alien and explodes in the fan in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:30:24 and 00:31:34. Brandywine Productions/ 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 1992.

a menace to the social order” (Mitchell qtd. in Silver 411), because it departs from Freud’s idea of a “melancholic attachment to an idealized wholeness and well-being (stasis)” (Silver 415). This lingering dread persists because of “[the] archaic mother,” otherwise known “[as] the parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end” (Creed 17). Ripley’s existence in the prison is mirrored by the alien who is simultaneously feared and incites violence and pain in the lives of the prisoners. Abstaining in her ‘tempting’ presence symbolizes their first imprisonment through pregnancy (in the womb) and their current imprisonment on a planet that starves them of all their desires, including assaulting her. Because they are violent offenders who have almost exclusively preyed on women, viewers can imagine how Ripley’s presence on the planet greatly endangers her bodily autonomy. The prisoners’ experienced rejection on a desolate planet is paralleled by Ripley’s own experienced rejection as a woman and as a symbolic mother to Newt. Ripley and the prisoners are alike in their ‘alien’ states and the latter are ‘rejected’ by the alien itself, which leads to their demise.

Ripley’s introduction to Fiorina 161 reveals the true nature of the prisoners and in conjunction with the alien, wreaks havoc on a dysfunctional system long enforced and ignored because of its benefit for men. In other words, “Ripley, herself, threatens the sanctity of the cloister on the planet where her ship crash-lands” (Waldrop 37). Furthermore, as Laura Mulvey elaborates, “[the] presence of women is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 809). Ripley, while not traditionally framed for the erotic gaze, is still considered a spectacle as a woman because of the abject. She is fetishized by the prisoners, even while “[she] attempts to blend in by shaving her head and donning baggy, masculine clothes similar to those worn by the cloistered men” (Waldrop 38). In her final act of self-destruction, “Ripley turns her back on the corrupt [alien] child within her and potential future children by jumping to her death, arms first out in a horrible, upside-down parody of crucifixion, and then gently and maternally wrapped around

the “child” that bursts from her chest” (39). As seen in Figure 7, Ripley’s decision to jump into the incinerator is a way to escape her life both as a woman and a mother. As the flames engulf her body, she is no longer a vessel for the patriarchy. Her journey into the void marks her acceptance that as a woman, she will always be “simultaneously looked at and displayed” (Mulvey 272) for the male gaze as well as constantly criticized for not doing enough in her ‘role’ as a woman. The loss of Newt and her ‘abandonment’ of her ‘duties’ as a woman carrying an alien child paint her as “no longer the good mother” but “a monster” (Waldrop 37). Even though it was not her choice to survive the crash that killed Newt and Corporal Hicks, she defies the odds by being a woman in a prison surrounded by men “who can’t keep themselves from wanting to [assault] her” (39) and being motherless by choice until that choice is taken away from her. Because of her agency, “Ripley’s femininity is both unshakable and dangerous for her and the men around her” (38), which frightens the company men and prisoners who wish to control her bodily autonomy.

Moreover, the pregnant female body and Fiorina 161 are both othered by the company men; the existence of both the female body and the planet displays “the illegibility of the materiality of a pregnant body within a visual economy that everywhere marks the boundary between the self and other” (Phelan 171). Just like the company men desire to occupy and control territory (the planet itself, Ripley, and the alien), “[the] hidden quality of the womb supports men’s blindness and denial that in turn encourage their sexualized phantasies of capturing and controlling the womb” (Silver 413). Despite the tension between the occupants of Fiorina 161, the relationship between the alien and Ripley is one of understanding, not only because she is carrying an alien baby inside of her, but also because pregnancy in all forms is considerably dangerous and grotesque under the male gaze in its relation to bodily function and the maternal versus paternal symbolic. As Linda Williams elucidates, there is “[a] surprising affinity (and at times subversive) affinity between monster and woman, the sense in which her look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing” (62). *Alien 3* remains pivotal to the idea of monstrous motherhood as a sci fi/ horror film.

Furthermore, as a female character in horror film who fully undergoes the throes of womanhood and motherhood, Ripley's complexity and resilience cannot be underestimated. ■



**Fig. 7** | Ripley falling into the incinerator in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 01:47:32. Brandywine Productions/ 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 1992.

## WORKS CITED

- Alien 3*. Directed by David Fincher, performances by Sigourney Weaver, Carrie Henn, and Charles Dance. Brandywine Productions, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 1992.
- Betterton, Rosemary. "Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, and Maternal Imagination." *Hypatia*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2006, pp. 80-100.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, 1993.
- "Laura Mulvey: Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, edited by Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay, Routledge, 1999.
- "Newt, n." *Oxford Languages*, 2023, /languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/
- "Parthenogenetic, n." *Oxford Languages*, 2023, /languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/
- Silver, Catherine B. "Womb Envy: Loss and Grief of the Maternal Body." *Psychoanalytic Review*, vol. 94, no. 3, 2007, pp. 409-30. *ProQuest*, ezproxy.kpu.ca:2443/login?url=www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/womb-envy-loss-grief-maternal-body/docview/195088823/se-2
- Waldrop, Kelly. "Bellies that Go Bump in the Night: The Gothic Curriculum of Essential Motherhood in the Alien Movie Franchise." *JCT (Online), Suppl. Special Issue: Curriculum of the Monstrous*, vol. 34, no. 5, 2019, pp. 32-43. *ProQuest*, ezproxy.kpu.ca:2443/login?url=www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/bellies-that-go-bump-night-gothic-curriculum/docview/2355328012/se-2
- Williams, Linda. "When the Woman Looks." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, University of Texas Press, 2015, pp. 17-35.