

Alien as arena of cultural dispute: Technology, Capitalism and Otherness

Alien como arena de disputa cultural: tecnología, capitalismo y otredad

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes different interpretations of the Alien franchise and how they divide the world regarding issues such as economic exploitation, technology and Otherness are analyzed. Cultural sociology allows us to understand how the interpretations are articulated through binary sets that see the franchise at the same time as a critique and an apology for: a) colonial and technological capitalist rationalism, b) the exclusion of the Other and the monstrous; and c) feminism, sexual and gender identity. The interpretations are analyzed as condensations of hopes and fears regarding contemporary social processes. The dispute over control of the meaning of Alien allows us to understand how fears and hopes are articulated about economic and technological rationality and gender relations.

Keywords

Social rationality;
cybernetic rationality;
science fiction; monsters;
cultural sociology; gender
identity; cultural
sociology

RESUMEN

En este trabajo se analizan distintas interpretaciones de la franquicia Alien y cómo dividen al mundo respecto a temas como la explotación económica, la tecnología y la otredad. La sociología cultural permite comprender cómo las interpretaciones se articulan a través de conjuntos binarios que ven al mismo tiempo la franquicia como una crítica y una apología de: a) el racionalismo capitalista colonial y tecnológico, b) la exclusión del otro y lo monstruoso, y c) el feminismo, la identidad sexual y de género. Las interpretaciones se analizan como condensaciones sobre las esperanzas y los temores en relación con los procesos sociales contemporáneos. La disputa por el control del sentido de Alien permite comprender cómo se articulan los temores y las esperanzas sobre la racionalidad económica y tecnológica y sobre las relaciones de género.

Palabras clave

Racionalidad social;
racionalidad cibernética;
ciencia ficción;
monstruos; sociología
cultural; identidad de
género; sociología
cultural

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INTRODUCTION

In 1979, director Ridley Scott's film *Alien* was released, which combined science fiction with horror in a novel way. The film became a reference for its plot, the visual effects and because the main character was a woman –Sigourney Weaver in the role of Ellen Ripley–. The first movie was followed by three sequels: *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986), *Alien 3* (Fincher, 1992) and *Alien Resurrection* (Jeunet, 1997).

In these films, Ellen Ripley and the alien face each other; she is always brave, determined and capable of overcoming any challenge, while the alien becomes increasingly violent and develops communicative and organizational skills as the saga progresses. Years later Scott directed two films linked to the first movies: *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien Covenant* (2017). Ripley no longer appears in these films, but other women took her place as main characters and fight against variants of the alien.

The film saga has had a great impact on popular culture and academia.¹ Barker *et al.* (2016) claim that the *Alien* movies are interesting because the saga brings together relevant meanings about technology, capitalism, colonialism, the feminine, the masculine, and the monstrous.

However, there is no agreement on the meaning these themes have for the academy. Some authors claim that *Alien* crystallizes the struggles of 1970s feminism in the figure of Ripley, and others stress that it is an anti-feminist and hetero-patriarchal manifesto (Freedman, 2015). It has also been mentioned that the film is a humanist and anti-technological positioning, while some people claim that it is an anti-humanist and pro-technological pamphlet (Nowell, 2011; Pegg, 2013). For Barker *et al.* (2016), these confronting interpretations result from the use of different analytical frameworks, including psychoanalysis, queer theory, feminism, and ideological criticism.

For this essay, these academic interpretations reflect more than the occurrence of opposing theoretical referents: they express the underlying cultural tensions to control the meaning of the *Alien* movies, as narratives that warn about a set of processes that pollute or purify contemporary societies. This paper aims to analyze how the symbolic interpretations that are in academic dispute over the meaning of *Alien* are articulated on the basis of binary principles that distinguish between what is considered sacred and profane, morally acceptable and unacceptable, between the processes of technological, economic and political rationality, as well as between the construction of sexual and gender identity.

In following the positioning of cultural sociology, it is assumed that these cultural tensions are “symbolic settlements that embody clear references to social system relations, whether defined in terms of power, solidarity, or other organizational forms” (Alexander, 2019, p. 70). The scholarly interpretations reviewed in this essay express the competing meanings of a set of themes that are considered cross-cutting in the *Alien* movies.

¹ *Alien* was included in the holdings of the U.S. Library in 2002 for its cultural, historical and aesthetically significant importance.

The first section confronts those who perceive in these films a critique or apology for capitalism, colonialism and technology; the second section debates the supposedly contaminating and pure character of otherness and the monstrous, while the third section discusses the hypothesis of the vindication or rejection of sexual and gender identities. The essay begins with a reflection on fiction as a translator of the disputes over the pure, impure, sacred or profane character of certain social dynamics. Subsequently, the plots of the *Alien* installments are reconstructed to finally analyze how academic interpretations attribute to them narratives that legitimize or delegitimize certain social orders.

Fiction and society

The films aesthetically project past and current social events in the form of utopian, dystopian and uchronic narratives (Kammerer, 2012). However, films are not, as Habermas (1989) suggests, “substitutes for relations to reality” that allow readers to enter into the action of fiction, as “a training ground for critical public reflection” or as a visual “precursor” to the public sphere. On the contrary, they are refractions in which expectations, fears, daydreams or nightmares about different social dynamics become apparent (Alexander, 2006; Williams, 2001; Jameson, 1988).

By problematizing issues such as freedom, autonomy or individuality, fictional narratives appeal to the reflection of values in practical and concrete situations (Nussbaum, 1990). Likewise, characters can be observed in moments where moral principles are questioned and face ethical dilemmas with political and social consequences (Rorty, 1989; Whitebrook, 1996). Because of this, the movies have consequences in the structures of feelings, because they show characters in concrete situations where they make decisions that affect them, but also impact others. These references make moral abstractions visible, allowing for specific forms of cognition and classification among audiences.

As suggested by Ewen and Ewen (2008), the films reproduce figurations for and against capitalism, colonialism, technology, democracy, or the identities of groups and individuals. For example, until very recently in films about the old west, crime, poverty, and racial, sexual and gender segregation propagated ideas that justified or criticized these types of inequalities. Although these references have not entirely disappeared, the fact is that “the western genre, which pitted cowboys against indians, almost disappeared [...], themes of racially based violent conflict and the vulnerability of civilizations shifted to wars between earthlings and fearsome invaders from authoritarian empires” (Alexander, 2006, p. 114) or, as discussed in this paper, extraterrestrial parasites threatening humanity.

Academic interpretations of films seek to show how they justify or question certain social issues in an open or veiled way (Spillman, 2020). In doing so, they generate spaces of dispute over the meaning of these films. The debates can be analyzed from cultural sociology as interpretations sustained in binary oppositions that evidence tensions over that which is morally weighted as pertinent or abominable, pure or impure, sacred or profane, sacred-pure or sacred-impure. Cultural codes establish foundational categories that classify individuals, groups, organizations and institutions in social and

moral terms, to such an extent that they establish the criteria for social belonging and membership (Seidman, 2017).

This allows the construction of the referents of the good and bad citizen, ruler or authority, of the liberating or oppressive potential of technology, or of who can be considered friend or foe. In the *Alien* franchise it is possible to find a set of binaries that perceive the film as a critique or defense of: a) capitalist and colonial technological rationalism; b) the exclusion of the other; and c) the socially accepted contours of sexual and gender identity. Each binary set is materialized in the main characters –whether they be humans, monsters or androids–, spaceships, military installations, companies and computers.² It is here that one can appreciate the competition to control the moral referents, the social hopes and fears attributed to the *Alien* franchise.

From Alien to Covenant: sequels and prequels

The plot of *Alien* and its sequels can be summarized in the struggle between Ripley and different versions of xenomorphs –parasitoid biological beings that use humans as hosts–.³ The encounter between humans and xenomorphs is not causal, but is constantly caused by the Weyland-Yutani Corporation to develop biological weapons from genetic manipulation of the aliens. In *Alien*, Ripley confronts a xenomorph that has gotten onto her ship, infecting and decimating the crew. In *Aliens*, the main character fights an alien queen who is exclusively engaged in laying cocoons to reproduce her species. In *Alien 3*, Ripley faces two challenges: fighting a xenomorph that has interbred with dog genes and dealing with the fact that she incubates an alien in her body. While she defeats the xenomorph-dog, she can't bear the thought of harboring a xenomorph in her, so she decides to commit suicide. In *Alien Resurrection*, Ripley has been cloned after her death and carries the alien's genes, making her a powerful weapon, but also the mother of a humanoid xenomorph whom she eventually decides to kill.

Each of these movies takes place in different scenarios, all of them icy, dark and highly technological but, at the same time, organic: a ship carrying minerals, a planetary colony, a prison where fanatical prisoners profess a millenarian religion and a military base where genetic experiments are carried out. Gothic references are evident in each of these settings and allow the ghostly presence of the alien to stand out, as well as the strength and spirit of the main character.

² In methodological terms, the tension between what is considered pure, impure, sacred or profane was reconstructed by posing the following questions to the texts under analysis: what motives are imputed to the characters' behavior, are they human or inhuman motives, are they centered on selfishness and profit or, on the contrary, on solidarity, what relationships are attributed to the characters, are the relationships based on reification or on respect for the other? What relationships are attributed to the characters, are the relationships based on reification or on respect for the other, and finally, what type of institutions are the characters accused of belonging to, are the institutions state or private, do these institutions generate processes of social inclusion or exclusion? Each text was analyzed in terms of the motives attributed to the characters and the relationships to which they supposedly ascribe in order to subsequently record the type of institutions that each character apparently defends.

³ At this stage of development, the xenomorphs embrace the faces of their victims to introduce an appendage through their mouths and deposit the parasite in them.

In each film, Ripley has to face different ethical dilemmas: risking her life to rescue her pet (the cat Jonesy), protecting an orphaned girl as if she were her daughter (Newt), ending her life to prevent the xenomorph she hatches from being used by the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, or deciding on the life of a creature she has conceived with the xenomorph queen. In addition, in each movie Ripley must fight against androids and computers that respond to the orders of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, but she also makes alliances with some androids that question the corporation's orders.

In the prequels *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*, the scenarios follow the same pattern and confront, like *Alien*, the female protagonists and the aliens; however, the stories focus on the ethical and moral conflicts of genetic manipulation. In *Prometheus*, a group of researchers funded by Weyland-Yutani Corporation decide to go in search of the aliens responsible for designing humans, whom they call the Engineers. When they find them, they discover that they created the humans in order to host xenomorphs in them. In *Alien: Covenant*, a rebel android from the Weyland-Yutani Corporation tries to produce new species from the genetic fusion between humans and xenomorphs, with the purpose of becoming a kind of life-creating god.

Capitalism, colonialism and technology

The different *Alien* movies have been interpreted as critiques of extractivist companies that unscrupulously alter ecosystems by releasing viral or bacteriological threats (Addison-Smith, 2005; Etxeberria, 2008). According to some interpretations, *Alien* shows how capitalism really works: under the control of insatiable corporations (Cohen, 2011), with engineers who are willing to use technology to create biological weapons (Mccutcheon, 2007) and militaries that facilitate each other's work (McCulloug, 2001). Thus, Thomson suggests that *Alien* is an allegory for how “corporate interests understand the commercial potential behind controlling nature, including aliens” (1997, p. 406). Thus, *Alien* is interpreted as an anti-colonial manifesto (Phillips, 1998).

Some readings suggest that the ships and space installations in *Alien* and its sequels possess a dark and threatening environment, at the same time technological and organic, an impersonal and cold technosphere, typical of colonizers and conquerors (McDaniel, 2016).⁴ Thus, the scenarios embody the icy and functional character – qualified as impure – of capitalism: places of work, production and profit generation. Indeed, computers and androids function as foremen of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation to control the crews and make decisions about their fate (Hantke, 2003).

This interpretation, which highlights *Alien*'s supposed critique of colonial capitalism and its technology, is also found in interpretations of *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*. Some studies suggest that in these two prequels colonialism is questioned (Williams, 2016) by showing how humans, as colonized, are the result of manipulation by their colonizers. In this way, human exceptionality, their autonomy, natural evolution

⁴ To Blackmore (1996), while *Alien* is a reference to commercial colonization and nature's response to its exploitation, *Aliens* is an allegory of the U.S. colonial failure in Vietnam. For this author, *Aliens* shows how an army with extensive technological and strategic capabilities is defeated by a population that defends itself with the minimum of resources. *Aliens* reflects America's moral defeat and its inability to negotiate that defeat.

and, above all, that they are the product of a god, as proposed by Judeo-Christianity, are debated (Pegg, 2013).⁵

As a result of these analyses, *Prometheus* challenges hegemonic Western anthropocentrism, as life “is the result of a nihilistic post-human creationism, where human life is reduced to the fleshy material of an incomprehensible chain of forced evolution by the Engineers that points to a nightmarish post-species future” (McWilliam, 2015, p. 545). The principle of technological rationality is drawn as an icy mechanism that dissipates the uniqueness of the human. This interpretation stands out clearly in *Alien: Covenant*, where an android is obsessed with producing-using humans as vessels—a new alien species that it cannot only control, but can recognize its creator: the android's lack of humanity is thus presented as the inversion of the divine (Pop, 2018).

Fear and fascination of the otherness

The different *Alien* movies have also been interpreted as a narrative that expresses the conservative dialectic of difference and identity, where the Other is always a threat that contaminates society and, consequently, must be subdued or exterminated (Bould, 2007). According to this reading, the xenomorph represents the paranoid structure of White American Protestant society that sees the Other as a danger (Burns, 2001; Dedman, 2010). Lev (1998) suggests that the xenomorph does not terrorize because it murders, but because it contaminates humans by hiding in them. Russell (2013) argues that the xenomorph queen in *Aliens*—who is also black—reinforces the stereotype popularized by the American conservative right that African American women have a large offspring to enlist the support of the state.

According to critics of *Alien*, the saga promotes a conservative ideology where the extermination of the Other is justified when it is seen as parasitic on the social order (Coyle, 2010; Christol, 2011). In *Alien Resurrection*, Ripley needs to preserve the sacredness of the heterosexual white woman, so she kills the child she conceived from her relationship with a xenomorph queen (Hutnyk, 2005), thus the film legitimizes racial cleansing policies (Wilcox, 2017). Moreover, as the movies of the franchise progress, the xenomorph goes from being an instinctive creature to one that has a conscience and is capable of communicating and generating community, which justifies its extermination, as it is a threat that contaminates white American democratic society (Lynteris, 2016; Maderspacher, 2006).

On the other hand, there are interpretations that suggest that the narratives of these films should be read as a defense of the purifying properties of hybridity and race mixing. For Dehon (1994), in *Alien Resurrection* Ripley's genetic fusion with a xenomorph, her mating with a xenomorph queen, and the fact that from that relationship a creature with human characteristics was engendered, actualizes the classical Greek figure where humans and gods eventually assimilate biologically after facing each other to death. As in mythology, the result of the struggle between a human and a supposed

⁵ Brinded (2014) warns that in *Prometheus* there is a reference to colonialism, when the Engineers—as colonizing parents—respond with violence to the humans—their colonized and enslaved—when the latter ask the former why they have created them.

extraterrestrial god is Ripley assimilating the strength of a xenomorph and a xenomorph who has become humanized.

Sexuality and gender

A third set of issues disputes the alleged vindication or denial of sexual and gender identities in the *Alien* movies. Some interpretations agree that the first movie was appealing because of the prominence of a female protagonist within the genre fiction and horror (Labarre, 2014; Nowell, 2011). Wilson (2012) suggests that the decision to cast Ripley as the main character was due to the success of the feminist movement of the 1970s. In *Aliens*, the female figures of Ripley, Newt, and Private Vazquez⁶ were highlighted. Ripley represents the woman who faces great dangers without losing her maternal instinct for the care –considered as pure– towards a pet or an orphan (Krämer, 1998).

These interpretations show that Ripley displays different facets of the feminine in each movie. In *Alien* she is determined and capable of inventing her own rules, in *Aliens* she is a militarized body, in *Alien 3* she is the allegory of a sick warrior, in *Alien Resurrection* she merges with the genetic code of the xenomorph to emerge as a post human woman. For Jackson (2009), Ripley represents the trope of the woman “left standing”, the last survivor in combat against the dangerous aliens and the power of capitalism embodied by the Weyland-Yutani Corporation.

Some interpretations note that the most interesting thing about Ripley is that she is a heroine who articulates her identity around masculine and feminine elements (Edwards, 2004). According to this reading, it is for this reason that she is uncomfortable for the patriarchal culture, since she is a strong, indomitable, determined character, but who does not leave aside her emotions and her sense of motherhood (Greven, 2010; Tigges, 2017). According to Freedman (2015), Ripley's behavior was what questioned at the time the anti-feminist policies of the Reagan era.

However, other analyses suggest that the figure of Ripley is functional to the heteropatriarchal order because she reproduces impure stereotypes of the feminine (Penley *et al.* 1991). For Penley *et al.* (1991), the protagonist projects the militaristic pretensions of Reaganism. She is depicted as hysterical, tormented by a motherhood that she is unable to achieve due to the constant demands of work required of her by the corporation. She is a woman lacking agency, a puppet of the patriarchy. Claydon (2007) asserts that the conservative ideology that permeates the film makes us believe that Ripley is brave and autonomous, but in reality she is manipulated by the Weyland-Yutani Corporation.⁷

⁶ Private Vázquez appears as a character that refers to the Latina lesbian butcher of the 1980s (Dassanowsky, 2001). A butcher seeks to project all the elements culturally attributed to masculinity –such as strength and muscularity– and not just look like a man –as happens with the female figure of the tomboy.

⁷ To Selisker (2015) it is evident that, for the patriarchal imagery, Private Vazquez, as a Latina lesbian butcher, must sacrifice herself for a white heterosexual Ripley, a kinder figure for the heteropatriarchal order.

In following these readings, Ripley is trapped in her maternal instinct-considered impure-which drives her to rescue a cat or care for Newt (Csicsery-Ronay, 2007). In addition, she is framed in stereotypes of the feminine when she appears in her underwear. As Davis (2000) warns, the scene in *Alien* where Ripley finds herself half-naked demolishes all the work of autonomy, courage and decisiveness she played in the film.

Other critics highlight the conservative ideology of the movies, since, under an assumed empowerment of women, they seek to incite fear and horror towards the revolutionary powers –assumed as profane– of the feminine. Some critics of the saga claim that it is interesting that the xenomorphs have a mouth that resembles a jagged male sexual member and that it is a woman who exterminates them. It seems that the aim of the film is to activate with Ripley the pre-oedipal image of the castrating vagina (Claydon, 2007). The protagonist appears as the impure woman who threatens the heteropatriarchal order.

The xenomorph has also been interpreted as a critical figuration of heteropatriarchy, because hosting as a parasite on humans is reminiscent of human gestation, and that the womb is the only moment when one is outside the symbolic structure and law of the father (Grafius, 2016). This critique of the heteropatriarchal order attributed to xenomorphs reaches such a point in *Aliens* that the reproduction of the alien queen is drawn as voluntary, where males are unnecessary, superfluous and impotent for her purposes.

In *Alien Resurrection*, Ripley becomes a genetically modified Ripley-alien-xenomorph resulting in a new species capable of dispensing with any male, thus merging the supposedly sacred form of queer lesbianism and the capacity for motherhood (Csicsery-Ronay, 2007). Furthermore, the xenomorph questions masculinity by making accessible to men the fear of rape and pregnancy, two moments that are perceived, from the patriarchy, as states of fragility and submission (Hoffman, 2011). For Kerry (2009), alien penetration and fertilization evoke men's fear of being feminized. The emotional response of the latter is a state of shock, revulsion and morbid fascination (Koven, 2003).

However, there are those who perceive in the xenomorph the condensation of conservative fears. According to these ideas, the design of the saga is made to show the contaminating character of the feminine (Eberle-Sinatra, 2005; Balinisteanu, 2012). The creature that embraces the head of her victims is read as a (m)other, a “mother-other” that appeals to the phallic, emasculating, sadistic-oral pre-oedipal mother (Davis, 2000). According to this interpretation, the constant fluid production of the xenomorph is intended to represent menstruation, and its mouth, a serrated male sexual member. By drawing the xenomorph as a phallic female, the supposed conservative ideology that fuels *Alien* warns of danger about the contaminating intentions of feminism, as the latter aims to reestablish the supposed ancestral phallic capacity of women (Csicsery-Ronay, 2007; Lopez-Cruz, 2012).

According to this interpretation, conservatism presents the eternal confrontation between Ripley and the xenomorph as if the protagonist were a sacred feminist, but in reality causes her to do what the heteropatriarchy expects of every woman: to destroy the (m)other in order to reestablish the male order (Davis, 2000). However, Hobby

(2000) considers that in reality the xenomorphs do not represent a phallic woman, but the jagged vagina, a figure revived by conservatives to show the tainted character of the feminist movement.

Conclusions

The interpretations aimed to control the meaning of *Alien*, as well as its sequels and prequels, are not the exclusive result of different theoretical frameworks, but of symbolic settlements that condense fears and expectations about colonial and technological capitalist rationality, processes of exclusion and inclusion of otherness and the monstrous, as well as sexual and gender identity. The aim of this paper was to show how symbolic settlements catalyze apocalyptic and utopian horizons, fears and hopes about a set of current social issues, without pretending to confirm or deny the veracity of the interpretations analyzed.

The power of capitalist corporations using technology as a means of mineral extraction and genetic manipulation draws a scenario where economic and technical rationality contaminates human life. It is interesting to note that in the *Alien* installments as a whole there is no sacred or pure vision of technology. The Engineers –be they humans, aliens, androids or computers– are characterized as entities that constantly desecralize human life, through technology and science.⁸

These evaluations make contrast with those made of the expressions of the monstrous and Otherness. According to some interpretations, *Alien* contains a visual narrative that warns us about the dangers of that which is different, of that which can be considered a contaminating parasitic entity because it silently introduces itself into the heterosexual, patriarchal and white social order. According to other positions, Otherness and the monstrous have a sacred character that must be defended, in the same way as hybridization and social mixing. From these readings it is perceived that in *Alien* and its sequels there is a certain multicultural manifesto.

Similarly, the sexual and gender identities that are read in the interpretations of the franchise are translated at the same time as badges of purity and impurity of the diverse. According to some analyses of *Alien*, the franchise is a feminist and, at times, queer positioning, claiming women's empowerment and sexual and gender identities. Certainly, other readings of the saga consider that in the background there is a conservative narrative which is warning us of the dangers of the feminist movement and sexual diversity for the heteropatriarchal order.

Competing scholarly interpretations of the moral meaning of this group of themes define a series of social hopes and fears. These themes are organized around technology, which functions as an epicenter around debates regarding the monstrous and Otherness, feminism and sexual diversity are braided. If we look at the *Alien* prequels and sequels as a whole, the xenomorphs are the result of genetic engineering of

⁸ In the *Alien* sequels and prequels, there are some androids that support the humans, but it is precisely this condition of “humanity” that makes them vulnerable, so they are always destroyed.

extraterrestrial humanoids. Those are, in turn, altered by androids that have been created by humans; however, the latter are also genetically engineered by the alien humanoids.

Alien refracts in academic literature a series of ethical and moral disputes that are relevant to contemporary societies: genetic manipulation, feminism, the vindication of Otherness, and sexual and gender identity. This reflection is made by means of images and dialogues with a cathartic impact on society's self-understanding, because they affect our feeling about what we consider right or wrong, pure or impure, sacred or profane. For this reason, *Alien* generates interest in the sphere of academic reflection, insofar as it is seen as condensing –sometimes wittingly, sometimes unwittingly– contemporary debates on certain issues. Cultural sociology can help us understand how these debates are morally configured in other spaces of the fictional world.

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