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# Writing the mother, the mother writing: the space of motherhood and feminine *écriture* in *Alien* and *The Matrix*

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**ABSTRACT.** The series of films *Alien* (1979), *Aliens* (1986), *Alien* (1992), and *Alien Resurrection* (1997), and the 1999 movie *The Matrix* illustrate the present state of technological advances in reproductive areas, and posit the anxiety such advances represents. In all these filmic texts, two main aspects are raised: the displacement of the female body as the site of motherhood, and the possibility that human reproduction might no longer need males and females to make it viable. In addition, the films suggest that technology is surely taking over many aspects of reproduction.

**Key words:** motherhood, film, cyber space, robots, reproduction, cyborgs.

**RESUMO.** Escrevendo a mãe; a escrita da mãe: o lugar da maternidade e a escritura feminina em *Alien* e *The Matrix*. A série de filmes *Alien* (1979), *Aliens* (1986), *Alien* (1992), and *Alien Resurrection* (1997), e *Matrix* (1999) ilustra o atual estado dos avanços tecnológicos em áreas da reprodução, e apresentam a ansiedade que tais avanços representam. Em todos estes textos filmicos, dois aspectos principais são discutidos: a deslocação do corpo da mulher como o local da maternidade, e a possibilidade que a reprodução humana não mais precise de homens e mulheres para torná-la viável. E, além disso, os filmes sugerem que a tecnologia está assumindo muitos aspectos da reprodução.

**Palavras-chave:** maternidade, filme, espaço cibernético, robôs, reprodução, cyborgs.

Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the whole individual is carefully fabricated within it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies (FOUCAULT, 1993, p. 66).

In a discussion of the space of motherhood it is important to place the possibility of this 'space' within the context of how the discourse on motherhood has determined and shaped the roles available to women in society; in other words, what can a woman do when she needs/has to/wants to occupy the social space 'as a mother'? Much psychological theorizing – especially after Lacan – has dealt with the process whereby the mother provides the space in which the child gains access to the symbolic order associated with the father<sup>1</sup>. How a woman becomes a mother is inscribed within the same discourse, which entrusts the father – or the

Father – with the Law, to which all will inevitably abide one way or another<sup>2</sup>. It is only through the construction of his/her identity in relation to this Law that the child can become an adult. The negotiation between these two realms – the pre-symbolic related to the mother, and the symbolic related to the father – is a key determinant of the degree to which an adult can function in social space. It is possible, therefore, to say that one of the ways in which a woman 'writes herself' is through motherhood<sup>3</sup>. Only a woman can give birth.

<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva (1986), especially in *Stabat Mater*, argues that there are not enough – or adequate – discourses on maternity. And, she goes on to point out, the only two exceptions are religion – Catholicism – which sees the mother as sacred, and science, which reduces the mother to nature.

<sup>2</sup> Many feminists have written on this subject, contending, among other things, that the insistence on the fusion of woman/mother in fact, as Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, Linda Rennie Forcey write, "excuses others from responsibility, denies recognition to those, including men, who also provide nurturance and care, and assumes nurturance flows in only one direction" (GLENN et al., 1994, 13).

<sup>3</sup> Obviously, this is not the only way a woman can 'write herself'. To believe such a thing, and worse still, to advocate such a reductionist view of womanhood

Up until recently, this was a truth taken for granted.

However, technological developments at the end of the twentieth century have put this truth in contention. With the advent of surrogate motherhood, it is possible for a child to have two mothers – one who donates the egg, and one who carries it. Of course the complexification of the issue does not stop there. With the insertion of a fertilized egg by another woman into the womb of a lesbian mother (for instance), a child can have not two, but three mothers. Finally, with the development of cloning technology, it is theoretically possible that a child can have only a mother, or only a father. Of course cloning until now has been reserved for non-humans, but the existence of the technology will always be a tempting possibility, notwithstanding the moral, ethical, and religious opposition to such practice<sup>4</sup>. The question begs repeating: how will a woman write herself as a mother anymore? How can we understand the complexities that these recent technological developments have brought upon the whole discourse of motherhood?

In the last years of the twentieth century, there were quite a few American movies that dealt specifically with reproductive matters, ranging from comedies like the 1994 *Junior*, in which Arnold Schwarzenegger plays the male scientist who becomes pregnant due to an experiment, to the 1995 horror flick *Species* in which a female alien (played by Natasha Henstridge) mates with human men in order to reproduce herself into countless little monsters<sup>5</sup>. In this discussion, even though I will refer to some other filmic texts, I will concentrate on the series of movies generally referred to as *Aliens*, as well as the film *The Matrix*. My choice of these texts is based on the fact that, first, I believe they represent the best of such films produced in the last twenty years of the Twentieth century, and they present well-developed representations of the spaces of women in the discourse of motherhood. This discussion wants to ask what these films mean in terms not just of mothering discourses, but how some ways of understanding the processes of perpetuation of the species can change (or have changed), and yet how some of the old ideology about women and about motherhood continue firmly in place. I will not claim that these films can only be

read as discussions of motherhood, but I do believe that the films propose a reflection on the nature of motherhood, and on the dangers of letting technology run a spectacle so far kept within what can only be called 'natural' terms. Other filmic texts could be used for this discussion, obviously<sup>6</sup>. But both *Aliens* and *The Matrix* participate in the discourse prevalent in the last decades of the twentieth century, and are themselves texts combining science fiction and horror, thus they make excellent case studies both of the encounter of unconscious desires and fantasy, and of issues grounded in the political world<sup>7</sup>.

### The alien poetics of the severed tongue

Less than one hour into the film *Alien Resurrection*, Ellen Ripley reaches into the mouth of a dead alien creature, rips off its tongue, and offers it to Call, another woman who, like Ripley, wants to defeat the monsters. It is no coincidence that the tongue looks like a penis. Call looks disgusted and refuses the souvenir. Later, after defeating one of the men of the pirate group in a basketball fight, Ripley repeats the gesture by reaching into his mouth and asking Call if she wants it as a trophy. Once again Call refuses. These two scenes are emblematic of the kind of event that, I believe, informs not just the series (*Alien* 1979; *Aliens*, 1986; *Alien 3*, and *Alien Resurrection*, 1999), but also *The Matrix* (1999). These films have many things in common, from the multi-million dollar cost for their production, to the dystopian projections of the stories, to the highly polished tech surface, and to an absorption in the figure of the mother. In all of them, indiscriminate reproduction is personified in a monstrous alien creature which uses the human body merely as, in the *Alien* series, a host, or in *The Matrix*, as fuel to power the machine/monster/Matrix. Furthermore, both the *Alien* series and *The Matrix* can

would mean a denial both of all the many other accomplishments of women throughout the centuries, as well as of the many ways men can function in the space of the mother by providing the care and attention usually associated with the mother.

<sup>4</sup> On the matter of the religious and ethical issues involved in matters of reproduction, see Joseph G. Schenker (2005). On the practice of embryo disposal in American fertility clinics, see Andrea D. Gurmankind, Dominic Sisti, and Arthur L. Caplan (GURMANKIND, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the film reproduced itself almost countless in a number of sequels, each more enamored with the idea of the *vagina dentata* represented by the sex-mad, man-killing alien and her descendants.

<sup>6</sup> 'Blade Runner' (1982, written by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples, based on Phillip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and directed by Ridley Scott) also discusses motherhood. In this film, humans are distinguishable from the Replicants, because humans come from mothers, whereas Replicants are the result of technology. In 'Blade Runner', a film credited with being the first cyberpunk movie, the Replicants have become so perfect, that their existence poses danger to humans and they are being destroyed. In order to verify who is human and who is a Replicant, tests are given to the suspects to measure the memories of their childhood and their empathy level. Supposedly, only humans can empathize. It is no surprise, then, that some of the questions relate to the figure of the mother, as we see in the following dialogue between Deckard and Rachel: "You remember the spider that lived in a 'bush outside your window'? 'Orange body, green legs'? Watched her build a web all summer? Then one day, there's a big egg in it. The egg hatched [...]" Rachael finishes the sentence: " [...] and a hundred baby spiders came out. And they ate her". Rachel is also the one who insists that she is human because she can show a picture of herself as a child, sitting with her mother in a porch. But Deckard tells her that all of those memories, as well as photos, are a fabrication. She has had no mother, therefore, she is not human.

<sup>7</sup> Another text that belongs in this category is Spielberg's *A.I. - Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Here, a race of mechas – mechanic human beings or cyborgs – is developed to fulfill different functions. The protagonist mecha, David, is a boy programmed to love. And the object of his love is his mother. This love for the mother, as we see in the narrative, withstands millennia, and is finally what sets him free from suffering in the end. But the mother's love is imperfect, inconstant, and can only be recreated in human form in the distant future, through the agency of creatures from other planets. What makes the subject of motherhood most interesting in *A.I.*, I believe, is that the purest love is demonstrated 'not' by the human mother, but by the mechanic toy, a teddy bear that accompanies and nurtures David to the end.

be seen as examples of the process of coming of age. In one case, it is a woman, Sergeant Ripley, who has to negotiate her role as a woman and as a mother; in the other, it is the aptly named Neo who has to decide whether to remain forever immersed in a pre-symbolic amniotic bliss, or to evolve into a fully-grown male sexual being. For both Ripley and Neo, the conflict with the mother illuminates the 'personal romance' as an inevitable part of a wider 'family romance', another way of inquiring who gets to engender what, using which methods.

The *Alien* series poses this conflict as a father versus mother struggle, starting with the fact that in the first of the series the main computer is called 'mother'. Moreover, the alien monster is depicted variously as an egg-laying creature (*Aliens*), as 'a bitch' (*Aliens*), as 'the queen' (*Alien 3* and *Alien Resurrection*). However, in the 1979 *Alien*, when the alien creature appears unexpectedly inside the little spacecraft Ripley takes in order to escape the doomed Nostromo, the alien creature is clearly portrayed as male<sup>8</sup>. Opinions of course vary about the series' positioning as a 'feminist' text, or an 'anti-feminist' one. Carla Freccero writes in *The Cultural Politics of the Alien Films* that, because of 'their hybrid genre, both horror and science fiction', these films are "particularly sensitive registers of the psychic and of the sociopolitical" (Freccero, 1999, p. 111). For Freccero, who points out that each *Alien* film appeared in a different decade, "the first three *Alien* films permit a contextual as well as an intertextual political/sexual reading, whereby ideologemes specific to a historical moment become more readable for being variations of the 'same' story" (Freccero, 1999, p. 111). She goes on to read in each film signs of their times, namely, anxiety about technology versus nature in the first film; the acknowledgement of the inescapability of technology in the second; resistance, mourning and survivor's guilt in the third. It is also the third film, *Alien 3*, which, she stresses, "may at least offer a way of imagining resistance (or absolute refusal) to a narrative of redemption that valorizes self-sacrifice for the good of the nation and that attempts to enlist outcast recruits for a national project of imperialism" (Freccero, 1999, p. 125-129). *Alien 3* is also the focus of Stephen Scobie, who reads the film as "broody meditation on the theme of guilt" (Scobie, 1993, p. 80), especially the guilt of the survivor, and most especially of the surviving mother who incorporates in her the lost loved ones. So, in this case, Scobie sees the alien inside Ripley as Newt, her 'daughter' killed when

the spaceship crashed on the planet Fiorina 161. Louise Speed, on the other hand, concentrates on the psychological aspects of *Alien 3*. She argues that the text can be read as providing a connection between the terms 'postmodern' and 'abjection'. She states that this connection is useful "in accounting for the destabilizing, if not apocalyptic, vocabulary so frequently used to describe the 'postmodern condition' – terms such as 'delirium, schizophrenia, nightmarish, crisis, negation, imitation, nihilistic, anarchic, obscene'" (Speed, 1998, p. 126).

As scholars have persuasively argued, the monster's motherhood is pitted against Ripley's (see SCOBIE, 1993; KAPLAN, 1995; SPEED, 1998). In *The Matrix*, the title itself evokes the womb; and, as we see, the 'real world' into which Neo discovers his identity is a womb-like material structure that sustains the spacecrafts as well as the machines that devise and run the world. It is not possible to ignore, however, that whatever the struggles Ripley and Neo have against the 'mother,' they take place within the confines of a discourse which embeds the mother herself. But, if there is a mother, who is the 'father'? In the *Alien* series we can say that the 'Company,' which employs the original crew of the Nostromo, and later becomes conflated with the nation itself, is ultimately the creator of the monster; in *The Matrix*, the 'mother' ('matrix') is the computer that generates the false reality Neo and everyone else live in. In fact, the computer-machines are the generator of everything, even – in the logic of the film – of a group of guerrilla fighters who, at the same time they abhor the Matrix, use its devices in order to attack it from inside. In other words, whereas in the first three *Alien* films the monster is associated with the forces of the natural – be they male or female – as opposed to the cultural/political/technological forces represented by the Company, in *The Matrix* there is a fusion of the two into one single entity, the matrix, that womb in which all humans live, mostly unaware of their position, always having to deal with reality as it is posed to them by forces beyond their control. In *Alien Resurrection*, the monster and Ripley are already the ultimate consequences of the technology that the Company represents. The tension here is then, clearly, between reproductive and replicative powers. The first one is a 'natural,' female, and centered on the physical body of the mother. The latter is a 'technological,' male, and ultimately wants to either destroy or replace the female, maternal body.

### Impregnated males, fighting mothers

The first *Alien* presents us initially with a group of people on their way to accomplish a mission. In the beginning, they wake up from their hypersleep and begin to assume their functions within the spaceship. It is not clear what the mission really is,

<sup>8</sup> However, as Stephen Scobie has pointed out, the matter of the sexual identity of the alien is problematic because, whereas in *Alien* it is coded as male, it is associated with childbirth and organic form. In *Aliens*, Scobie continues, "monstrosity is unmistakably female, and explicitly identified with motherhood" (SCOBIE, 1993, p. 82).

except that it has something to do with transporting a cargo from one place to another. The spaceship where the crew go about their routine can be seen as a womb navigating through space, if not aimlessly, at least free from any impeding worry; they know their journey has an end, and as long as they stay within the spacecraft, they will arrive at their destination. During their sleep, however, the computer called 'Mother' changed destination and purpose of the journey. This is not clear to any of them at first, and it is only the presence of the alien creature that eventually forces each crew member into a state of heightened alert, since suddenly they realize their deliverance – the end of the trip – and their very existence are in jeopardy.

When the alien creature literally bursts into the scene from inside a crew member's chest, two important things happen: first, there is the realization of a boundary crossing, because a man has been 'impregnated' and 'given birth'. Second, the remaining crew members realize that, unless they fight this unknown source of indiscriminate impregnation, they will all be destroyed. From the point of view of three later installments, it is not difficult to see why Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver) is the one chosen to remain alive while the other members perish, one by one. Ripley is not simply a woman, but a very smart one who can control the machines (the spacecraft and the android). She is also the one who can force the computer 'Mother' to 'confess' the change of plans that occurred during the flight, and to acknowledge the new order in which the crew members are expendable.

One important point in the gender economy of the text is that Ripley is marked as a heterosexual female from the beginning; she has wavy medium-long hair, and she attracts the attention of Dale, the commander of the ship. In a sense, if anybody 'deserves' to be impregnated, it is her. In the logic of the film, it seems that the fact that she is a woman of superior intellectual and physical abilities makes her more capable of containing the fertilized egg which will eventually become another egg-laying – i.e. queen mother – creature. In the process of 'natural selection' that takes place inside the spacecraft-womb, she is the fittest. But, in spite of the presence of obviously 'rapist' figures of the male aliens inside the escape hatch, she neither has any sexual encounter nor is impregnated in this part of the story. Instead, the film ends with Ripley entering the cocoon-like container – like a fertilized egg herself, in a sense – from which she will emerge only in the second film, *Aliens*, the sole survivor of the crash of the spacecraft on to planet Fiorina 161.

But in this second installment of the series, Ripley appears as an adopted mother. From the

dream-sequence when she sees her belly swell up and then burst with the alien creature, to the last scene, when she puts her 'adopted' daughter Newt to sleep in the same cocoon-shaped container inside the spacecraft, Ripley's mothering instincts are not just tested, but transformed. If she was already a fighter, as seen in the first narrative, now she is even more so, because she discovers that her 'daughter' Newt, depends exclusively on her for survival. The film clarifies early on that Ripley's real daughter Ann lived a full life and died while Ripley was literally lost in space, immersed in hypersleep; this knowledge makes her relationship to Newt more poignant. She has lost one daughter already, so she cannot afford to lose another. Her emotional connection to Newt is exclusive. That explains why she does not give a second thought to going inside the building to rescue the male officers carried off by the alien; as she says, 'they are dead already,' however, in the end, she decides to enter the most protected place in the compound and face the biggest monster in order to save Newt. Later, when they are all inside the escaping spacecraft, Ripley once again fights the monster to defend the child.

Up until this point of the story the alien creature is shown almost as a male, as an impregnator. But, to continue the strange logic, it continues to impregnate males exclusively. Indeed, except for references to the women settlers that were killed, we do not see any female body – other than Ripley's – bursting with the baby monster. It is only when Ripley, going in search of Newt, breaks into the monster mother's 'labor room' and we see her laying the eggs, that the double monstrosity is then revealed: the alien creature is a mother, but also an impregnator – it is at once female and male. Therefore, when the monster hitches a ride on Ripley's spacecraft, breaks the (male) android into pieces, smears the whole area with sticky substances, and proceeds to try to destroy Newt, it once again can be seen both as a mother seeking revenge for the destruction of her 'children' (the eggs and the spider-looking creatures the humans destroyed), and as a male rapist who wants to take Newt from the protective arms of her mother and 'impregnate' her. Ripley, on her turn, fights as a mother to Newt, but also as a machine-controlling woman – a woman who has appropriated, if not the power of the Company, at least one of its mechanical extensions. The monster is ejected on to open space, and, it seems, destroyed, while Ripley accommodates Newt for the long space journey somewhere, to a place where they can be safe from such monsters, probably. It is significant, however, that in an earlier

dialogue, Newt tells Ripley that monsters are those things inside you, like a baby<sup>9</sup>.

*Aliens 3*, the most 'noir' of the four films, takes place in a planet where the only human female is Ripley. All the other human inhabitants are men, all criminals collected here in the Planet Fiorina, 'Fury' 161, "a wasteland of rotting technology at the 'ass end of space'" (SPEED, 1998, p. 125). Here, Ripley's struggle against the creature can be seen as the twisted struggle of a monstrous impregnator (male) against an impregnatee (female) for control of the males in the planet. The monster, which landed on the planet with Ripley's spaceship, this time concentrates its reproductive impetus on only two creatures, a (male) dog, and Ripley herself. But that does not prevent the appearance of many of the same creepy, spider-shaped creatures which infested the two previous films. What the monster seems really interested in doing in this planet inhabited only by men is killing them. Ripley is the only one spared by the monster when the occasion is presented, in a scene when she is cornered and endures the 'breath' of the creature right to her face; hence, it seems obvious that she and the monster have something in common. Indeed, as Louise Speed writes, "the monster is Ripley's alter ego", and "the embodiment of the fear of difference" (SPEED, 1998, p. 134). Even Ripley recognizes this commonality when she goes after the monster and says that they are 'family'.

And yet, questions about the monster's reproduction through Ripley still remain. Amy Taubin writes that the return to the female body as the site of reproduction functions as an answer to the "ultimate outrage" of the first film, in which a male was impregnated (Taubin, 1992, p. 9). However, even if we take the logic that the female body is 'more appropriate' for reproduction, this solution still does not solve the problem posed by the fact that the impregnator is, or can also be, a female<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Some scholars have also persuasively argued that the alien creature represents AIDS, that which is inside the body, and which will kill the person carrying it (see FRECCERO, 1999; SCOBIE, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> As a site of monstrosity, female-female reproduction is suggested in another monster film, *Jurassic Park* (1993, based on Michael Crichton's 1990 novel with the same title, adapted and directed by Steven Spielberg), in which the scientists, attempting to control the reproduction of dinosaurs, have controlled the chromosomes of the cloned dinosaurs to make all of them female. But, as the visiting scientist says in the beginning of the film, 'life will find a way'. Indeed, as the narrative of *Jurassic Park* goes on to show, life does find a way to either change the gender of some dinosaurs to male or to invent ways in which a female dinosaur can impregnate another female dinosaur. As a result, the monsters end up taking control of the island, and the humans – among whom is a married, childless couple – barely escape alive. For a discussion of issues related to the possibility of female-only reproduction, see Elizabeth Sourbut's *Gynogenesis: A Lesbian Appropriation of Reproductive Technologies*. Sourbut argues that, even though "the possibility of women using reproductive technologies to conceive children with two genetic mothers and no genetic father" is still not a practical possibility, "as a concept it is a way of bringing lesbians into the debates around assisted reproduction" (SOURBUT, 1996, p. 227).

In *Aliens 3*, even though it seems that there is only one mature monster, and only one dog bursts while 'giving birth,' 'baby monsters' are all over the place. Unless, of course, we consider that Ripley herself is the monster whose difference kills. It is significant that Clemens – the resident doctor-convict – is decapitated by the monster only after he has sex with Ripley<sup>11</sup>. Is the monster jealous of her? Is the monster's act a reflection of Ripley's desire to kill the male after he's done with the act that can impregnate her? It cannot be coincidental that it is only after she has sex with Clemens that Ripley discovers her 'pregnancy' – the 'baby' located somewhere in her throat. Is it possible that the movie itself is so nervous about its own weavings of monstrosity that it wants to resort to a heterosexual logic?

The throat, an important component of the speech organs, recalls once again the later, emblematic scene in *Alien Resurrection* when Ripley rips off the monster's penile-looking tongue, seeming to suggest, at this point, that it is the impregnation by the most visible organ of speech that makes Ripley monstrous. But the other inhabitants of the planet have the same organs, except, obviously, the ones that determine their gender. Thus Ripley's female body is the only site out of which another 'Queen monster' can come. But why is Ripley chosen for this high duty? Probably precisely because she herself is a female, and only female-female impregnation can produce queen monsters<sup>12</sup>.

The exact nature of this creature is fully spelled out in *Alien Resurrection*, where Ripley is reconstructed as the product of cloning from blood left behind by the 'real' Ripley two hundred years before. As she is cloned, the baby queen monster is cloned too, and then taken out of her chest cavity and raised, together with other eleven ones taken from other (although malformed) clones of Ripley. Later in the film, inexplicably we see that only one monster is the building-sized mother again, and she is in the process of giving birth – rather than laying eggs – this time to a humanoid female creature complete with human eyes and breasts. At this point, the monster's fully represented femaleness admits no doubt. But others remain. First, who fathered her 'child'? Is she the product of self-

<sup>11</sup> See Louise Speed (1998, p. 138-139), for a full discussion of how Ripley's sexual encounter with Clemens constitutes a fundamental break with genre conventions.

<sup>12</sup> Evidently, the first one to be impregnated in this film is the dog. If we consider the fact that Jones, Ripley's cat in *Alien*, was never impregnated (even though it is suggested that he spent enough time with the creature), the canine impregnation in *Aliens 3* can either signal a parallel between Ripley and the dog, or the alien's abandonment of a 'program' of exclusively human impregnation. Can also be a way for the text to refer to the fact that among all animals, dogs were domesticated first and therefore have become closer to humans?

impregnation? And, in terms of genealogical structure, who is this creature? Ripley's granddaughter? Ripley's sister? No matter: Ripley kills the creature later, after it has killed the queen mother as well as one of the scientists glued to the walls of the birthing chamber.

But, and this is an important detail, Ripley only kills her 'offspring' when it threatens to destroy Call, the female android. Even though the newborn creature's death evidently pains Ripley (she cries as the 'child' screams in pain), she cannot help it: in the unfolding of the narrative, she has developed a great attachment to the female android Call who, like her, is only partly human. The last scene of the movie shows Ripley and Call looking out through the spaceship window, for the first time approaching Earth, while Ripley says that she is not sure she will get used to it, because she is 'a bit of a stranger' herself. The image of the two women, looking longingly at the approaching planet, reinforces the idea that this is where they are going to live now. Following the reproductive logic of the four films, it is clear that these two will reproduce themselves, post human females who do not need men. Is that the ultimate monstrosity?

#### Male power versus the power of the matrix

1998/99 were two years in which at least two important films concerning motherhood were released, and both of them dealt with the nature of reality, as well as with the dangers of 'unnatural' reproduction. In 1998, 'The Truman Show' – featuring Jim Carey as the protagonist – shows the reality of Truman Burbank, a man whose life is a complete fiction designed by Christof for the benefit of a TV audience. Truman's struggle throughout the story centers on his attempts to discover the 'real' world, as the TV audience watches and cheers even against its own interest to watch the continuation of the story. But the 'Truman Show' is not really a science fiction film, since it can be characterized rather as a philosophical reflection on the nature of reality<sup>13</sup>. It is the 1999 *The Matrix* that can be seen, in a sense, as the consequence of Ripley's return to Earth. In this story, Neo, a computer hacker who, "like Alice, gets sucked down a cyber-rabbit hole into a world where nothing is as it seems" (LAZARUS, 2000, p. 57), is the hero to counterpose the power that Ripley and Call represent. The 'Matrix' can be seen as the result of the relationship between Ripley – a cloned being, half human and half monster – and Call, a female cyborg. The

genetic 'Y's have all been destroyed, or encompassed in the much more powerful female component. But, as any discourse engenders its own counter-discourse, there are enough forces left for Neo to fight the Matrix, the powerful and deadly combination of female power turned into an all-encompassing machine.

A more 'balanced' gender combination is achieved when Neo joins his power to those of another male, Morpheus, who is also a father figure. In this 'cyber-rabbit' hole he joins Morpheus and his group of renegades whose aim is both to fight the machine, which grows humans in order to suck up their energy and self-perpetuate, and to find 'the One' – the savior who will release them and all humans who are used by the machine. In exchange, they allow humans to live in a world of illusions (dreams), where they seem to have real lives, real jobs, real problems. Only a few are able to recognize the world of illusion provided by the Matrix and experience the 'real world' – the leftover of the planet after a nuclear holocaust which destroyed the air and forced the remaining life to find shelter in the sewers. It is in the sewers that the Matrix has set up its/her power by keeping human beings immersed in a nourishing fluid, and then collecting their energy to fuel an immense power plant.

As soon as Neo chooses to take a red pill and to join Morpheus in his quest, he wakes up naked, hairless, covered in a gooey substance; at the same moment he realizes that his body is connected to several tubes, he also sees the 'real' world for the first time. In a nightmarish scene, a 'baby sitter' spider-looking machine comes to him and disconnects all the tubes. Neo is then precipitated – aborted – down a slippery canal and later fished out of a pond by Morpheus and his crew. When he wakes up, he is inside Morpheus' decaying ship, still naked, and still hairless. Morpheus and his companions proceed to 'reconstruct' Neo's body using so many needles that he looks like a pin cushion. Later, they show Neo how the 'real world' is engineered, using the tools of technology. Here the unsightly hole in Neo's neck functions as a conduit for a computer cable through which new programs can be downloaded directly into his brain. Because these programs can deliver not just information, but especially physical abilities, Neo becomes a combination of superman-super hacker who can see the Matrix's machinations from the inside. Only then can he defeat it/her. In the process, he gets the girl, confirms Morpheus's prophecy, and is on his way to destroy the Matrix and therefore save the world. To recall Ripley's journey, it seems that her role up until *Alien 3* is a

<sup>13</sup> See the excellent article by Robert Castle (2005), *The Truman Show's Sociology*.

preparation for her ultimate sacrifice when she decides not to give birth to the 'child' inside her. In other words, her finest hour is the hour of her death; it is only through her death that she defeats the monster at the very time she 'gives birth' to it. Neo, in contrast, is groomed by Morpheus and his crew to destroy the monster, and to survive it as well. The woman is therefore a martyr to her motherhood: it is meaningful that, in *Alien 3*, even as she is falling in the fire and the baby monster bursts out of her chest, Ripley embraces it as a mother would her child. Neo the male does not embrace the monster he is fighting inside the Matrix; instead, he decodes it, transforms it into information, and submits it to his intellect. Neo represents the ultimate *cogito* to Ripley's ultimate maternal body ripping itself open as it gives birth.

### Reproduction versus replication

It has become a truism that horror movies have always been concerned with the idea of motherhood and reproduction. The *Alien* series, a hybrid form of horror-science fiction, as pointed out, follows the formula. As a narrative, it manages to combine several sources. Carla Freccero points out that *Alien*

quotes *2001* directly, in the embryonic birth scenes of the ship's crew; in the chamber music that plays inside the command room, in the look of the ship's computer, and especially in the scenes of Ripley's hallucinogenic orgasm as she watches Nostromo blow up, with the colors and shapes that are reflected on her helmet (FRECCERO, 1999, p. 112).

Freccero then asks how *Alien* changes the terms of *2001, A Space Odyssey* (1968, written by Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke, directed by Stanley Kubrick). Unfortunately, she does not provide an answer; rather, she proceeds to indicate that *Alien* reverberates with the historical moment it was created, thus revealing the 1979 problems with the oil crisis (the ship is a refinery of sorts), the nostalgia for imperialism (the ship is called *Nostromo*, the title of Conrad's novel), and the "peak, climax or end of the second wave of the women's movement" (FRECCERO, 1999, p. 112). I agree with Freccero's anchoring the text of *Alien* on the ambivalence about technology at a time when it was equated with the high cost it exacted from the natural resources of the planet. It seems to me, however, that if we see the *Alien* series as a whole, questions raised in one installment are usually answered in another. Or, sometimes, *Alien* answers or comments on issues raised by other films.

In the case of the relationship between *2001* and the *Alien* series, I believe that if the latter quotes from the previous in the aspects Freccero mentions,

the end of *Alien Resurrection* is also related to *2001* in one even more important aspect: in both cases the resulting 'human being' is the product of technology. For the hero in *2001*, the technology is 'pure' – he was reconstructed by the computers/robots, out of his own flesh. As the product of pure technology; he is logos personified. In *Alien Resurrection*, the scientists cloned Ripley from 'impure' matter, from blood Ripley left behind in Fiorina 116. The blood can be seen as a marking of menstruation, which has been for a long time a mark of female 'impurity'. Thus, it is not surprising that the beings cloned from Ripley's blood – herself and the 'siblings' she finds in the lab and proceeds to destroy with a flame-thrower – are all female.<sup>14</sup>

But *Alien Resurrection* also quotes both from an earlier film, the original *The Fly* (1958, written by George Langelaan and James Clavell, and directed by Kurt Newmann) as well as from its 1986 remake directed by David Cronenberg. In the first *The Fly*, the monster is a mechanical joining of part-fly and part-person, a creature posed at the limit of difference between the human and the non-human. In *Alien Resurrection*, the cyborg Call is the epitome of that junction. It is important that she is also the only female cyborg in the series. As we have seen, in each installment of the *Alien* series there is always a cyborg: the evil Ash in *Alien*, the good Bishop in *Aliens* (who reappears as a fermenting head in *Alien 3*), and finally the female Call in *Alien Resurrection*.

The presence of these cyborgs is important for the development of the narrative, but what do they represent? According to Nina Lykke, cyborgs are "grotesque post-industrial boundary figures, questioning the boundaries between human, organism and machine, celebrated cornerstones of the modern, scientific world-view" (LYKKE, 1996, p. 5). As films fascinated by the replicative powers of the machines, the *Alien* series has of course to refer back to the cinematic 'mother of all cyborgs'. So, it is not surprising that in one of the last scenes of *Alien Resurrection*, when the queen monster gives birth to a half-human, half-monster creature, the male scientist glued to the walls of the birthing room greets the birth of the monster by saying that she is a 'beautiful butterfly': that creature is, finally, the culmination of the project of the human-insect junction that *The Fly* puts forth. It takes a male to recognize it and to pronounce it beautiful. Ripley, who has been absorbed to the interior of the chamber to witness the birth,

<sup>14</sup> One other important moment of *Alien 3* recalls another science-fiction/horror movie, the 1991 *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (written by James Cameron and William Wisher Jr., directed by James Cameron) when the male cyborg, knowing that he is carrying the only surviving chip that will later be used to destroy humanity, sacrifices himself by entering the melted lead container.



greet the newborn creature differently: even though the creature 'recognizes' Ripley as her mother, Ripley wants to destroy it, and proceeds to do so in order to defend Call. The child cannot interfere in the mature relationship the mother is forming. Now, unlike the pure mother monster, Ripley, a hybrid, kills her own offspring in order to couple with another female hybrid.

If *Alien* quotes from these sources, where does *The Matrix* quote from? As pointed out by the dialogue, when Morpheus refers to the 'rabbit hole', *The Matrix* wants to quote from *Alice in Wonderland*. However, as suggested earlier, the most important source of *The Matrix* is *Aliens*; that is, the latter film can be seen as a continuation of the previous one, with changed main character, changed gender, but same anxieties about reproduction. In other words, *The Matrix*, like *Alien*, argues that there is more than one kind of reproduction. Giving birth has, therefore, become an activity through which not just women, but the capitalist society embodied in the Company in *Alien*, or the monster-machines in *The Matrix* can write themselves.

Writing about the psychoanalytic sphere and motherhood discourse, E. Ann Kaplan (most likely recalling Foucault), remarks that she sees "the female body (and in particular mother/child bodies) as constructed by/through the patriarchal Imaginary to fulfill specific patriarchal or capitalist needs" (Kaplan, 1995, p. 39). The biologically and socially constructed mother/child dyad impacts immediately on the woman's body, inscribing her inescapably into the institution of motherhood and capturing her energy to fuel the patriarchal/capitalist engine.

But, as the films suggest, motherhood itself is not a stable concept. In the first *Alien*, Ripley's motherhood is embodied in her care for her cat; in *Aliens*, she learns that her real daughter died (after living to be fifty-seven), so the girl Newt, the only survivor in the ravaged planet, occupies the emotional space of the real daughter. The 'adoption,' even though it does not replace the real child, at least enables Ripley to continue within the mothering economy, helping, protecting, nurturing another young being. Since Newt dies in *Alien 3*, Ripley's only 'child' now is the monster that grows inside her. But she rejects this 'child' by sacrificing herself, the only way to kill the monster. It is significant that the wailing sound the monster makes as it explodes out of her chest is the wailing of a new-born baby. In a sense, by renouncing this 'baby', Ripley is making a choice for the whole of humanity, because she knows that, if allowed to grow, the monster will destroy all human life. Ripley cheats on the Company – read here as patriarchal and capitalistic enterprise – and refuses to mother.<sup>15</sup>

And if we take *The Matrix* as the continuation of – or commentary on – *Alien*, what would the result of this mothering be? Since the most visible representative of the Company is the cyborg – and especially the cyborg Ash – the Company stands for technology's amoral use of organic resources, whatever they are. In *The Matrix*, the monster robots are a perfect blend of the idea of the alien creature and the technological power of the Company, using the human body and the human mental activity as fuel – a variation of how the monster in *Alien* uses humans.

It is also possible to see the conflict as embodied into the dichotomy proposed by the struggle between 'mother' and 'father', which traditionally has been said to represent the division between nature and culture. The child, in order to grow up to become an adult, needs to leave the realm of nature (mother) to gain access to the realm of the symbolic, the realm of the father. Indeed, in *The Matrix*, as long as the humans grown by the machines continue sucking the sustenance the monstrous mother provides, they will forever remain as hairless and naked as babies. It is only those who 'choose' the father – Morpheus – who can become fully functioning adults. However, because the monstrous mother – the Matrix – is itself the product of technology, it can provide the 'nursing babies' with dreams of adulthood, which include jobs, interest in the opposite sex, smoky bars, and so on. 'But it does not provide the means of reproduction'.

As mentioned earlier, at a certain point of the narrative, the film shows a field covered with lit cocoons, each containing a human baby. But nothing is said or explained about how these babies were conceived. Are they too, like Ripley of *Alien Resurrection*, the product of cloning? If that was so, they would all be versions of the same person<sup>16</sup>. Since they are different – witness the people in Morpheus's ship – they have come from different parents. But who are these parents? Tank informs Neo that there is a place 'near the core of the Earth', called Zion – the last human city – where real people still live, resist the Matrix, and continue making '100% pure, old fashioned, homegrown' humans like him and his brother Dozer. But these humans would not likely freely provide the material for the making of human slaves. The Matrix itself, no matter what the name might imply, cannot make humans. Therefore, the sperm and egg to make the babies must come from a human source, unseen in

<sup>15</sup> One can also see this as an act of defiance against patriarchal societies that oppose and kind of abortion and see the female body as a mere vessel to the

child. Since Ripley cannot 'abort' the monster, she will kill herself, and therefore what she carries within her body.

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the only one who appears as replications of himself is the villain, Agent Smith.

the visual space of the film, but suggested by the narrative itself. Are the female, reproductive energies co-opted or merely unacknowledged in this highly replicative structure?

Unless, of course, these babies are wholly the product of the father, 'a father' completely associated with the capitalist enterprise of running the world of illusions which is the Matrix. If such is the case, The Matrix pits reproductive energies – associated with the mother – against the replicative energies – associated with the father. But the surprising ending – when Neo is 'reborn' with the kiss from a woman – provides another possibility, especially if we take the ending of *Alien Resurrection* in consideration. If the Matrix is a machine – a man-made technological device – that can generate babies; if machines are the product of the capitalist enterprise associated with men; if both Ripley and Call are themselves the products of technological machinations and crossings, then Neo and his girlfriend are the antidotes to the monstrosity suggested by the other two models. As man and woman, they can – or are in the putative position of being able to – generate 'true', 'one hundred percent human beings'. In other words, replicative forces are defeated, and reproductive forces will once again regain their place.

Unless, that is, we pause to observe the name of the woman who falls in love with Neo, Trinity. Her name recalls the divine trinity of the Christian tradition: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit<sup>17</sup>. In other words, two males and one entity that can appear (again according to Christian tradition) sometimes as a pigeon, sometimes as a flame, and sometimes as an internal force guiding people to the righteous path. The name of another first-line character, Morpheus – who becomes Neo's 'father' in his quest to acquire knowledge to defeat the Matrix – recalls the god of dreams, son of Hypnos, the god of sleep in Greek mythology. Indeed, he does induce Neo's deep sleep, which turns out to be an awakening to the reality of the world he lives in. But Morpheus's name also recalls 'morph': that which combines forms, and can at the same time be combined forms. In conjunction with Trinity's name, it is possible to see that Morpheus occupies the role, in the Christian Trinity, of the Holy spirit, which changes forms, combines forms, and inspires those it inhabits to follow the correct path. In such case, the third element in the Trinity is male, precisely like the Father and the Son. If the name of the character Trinity is meant to suggest the Christian

Trinity, then it is possible to say that she represents a male entity, and therefore is a male herself. Therefore, to continue this logic, if Trinity and Neo were to produce a child, would this child have father and mother, or two fathers?

### Writing the space of the mother

Taking the logic expressed in these five films, how can a woman write herself as a mother anymore? Has the space for the mother been emptied of meaning under the pressure of new, technological ways of producing new human beings? In 'Motherhood and Postmodernism', Terry Caesar argues that the space of motherhood in postmodern narratives is not an evacuated and exhausted one. On the contrary, he writes, "the space occupied by motherhood is an abject one in which mothers prove unsettling because their very experience persists in being so authentic and singular" (CAESAR, 1995, p. 120). If we consider the *Alien* series and *The Matrix* as prime examples of postmodern narratives, it seems clear that, unlike Caesar, the experience of motherhood is neither authentic nor singular. Rather, the films suggest, at the very outset, motherhood is always already part of a replicative economy that invests on the production of the best possible specimens. How else to understand the medical discourse on – and the available technology for – the manipulation of hormones, in-vitro fertilization, in-uterus operations of defective fetuses, and so on? The current popular debates about the morality of surrogate motherhood, as well as sale of eggs and sperm by university students, constitute only one more step in the understanding of reproduction as a phenomenon that is, as Paula A. Treichler argues, "closely linked to a pervasive scientific metaphor of the body as production factory" (TREICHLER, 1990, p. 120-121). And whose body is this? Obviously, it is the female body, the one out of whom the baby will emerge. By posing the possibility that babies can be generated either by cloning (*Alien Resurrection*) or by machines (*The Matrix*), these films are ultimately proposing that motherhood will no longer be a singular experience, since even a machine – not to mention males – will be able 'give birth'. Indeed, already in 1991, in her *The Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway proposes that,

Sexual reproduction is one kind of reproductive strategy among many, with costs and benefits as a function of the system environment. Ideologies of sexual reproduction can no longer reasonably call on notions of sex and sex role as organic aspects in natural objects like organisms and families (HARAWAY, 1991, p. 162).

<sup>17</sup> The first film of the *Matrix* series resulted in many essays about the religious aspects in the film. Among many, I recommend James L. Ford's (2000) *Buddhism, Christianity, and The Matrix: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema*.

Is the 'post-natural' reproduction what the last *Alien* and *The Matrix* propose? And if that is the case, where can we locate this kind of questioning as far as motherhood is concerned? Are these films finally 'feminist,' or, as Carla Freccero says (especially about *Aliens*), they are actually advocating an anti-feminist and anti-lesbian agenda<sup>18</sup>? How can we understand the insistent questioning of the position and the development of the mother in these narratives? Of course, as visible manifestations of deep and complex cultural anxieties, the two narratives sometimes display the contradictions present in any culture. Whether, say, *Alien* advocates a return to a simpler mode of mothering, or participates in a feeling of euphoria for the advancements of scientific knowledge (especially reproductive science) is beyond the point. What really matters is that both narratives work with the ever-changing cultural material (the series *Alien* covered the three last decades of the Twentieth century, and *The Matrix* appeared on the very last Spring of the century) documenting the oscillations and the social debates around the issues. Both could theoretically be faulted with not providing clear-cut answers. But perhaps the most important role art – and cinema among other manifestations of art – can provide is to continually ask questions, propose doubts, unveil competing ways of looking at reality. The cloning of human beings still exists only in the realm of imagination, and machines 'still' do not control all aspects of reality. And yet, it is undeniably important that films, and art in general, keep providing us with the space for looking into the implications of how technology can change the way of look into the most basic human relationship, that between the mother and her child.

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<sup>18</sup> Not to mention, again according to Freccero (1999), that the *Alien* films present a series of good non-whites whose function is to die to make room for the white Ripley.