

The Projector

A Journal on Film, Media and Culture

Spring 2012 Issue, Vol.12 , no.1

Cinephilia and the Passion of Textual Analysis



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Cinephilia and the Passion of Textual Analysis



Cynthia Baron

Despite film and media studies' sustained and even renewed interest in “the array of activities involved in the production and reception of films” and “the variety of ways in which the film text is intermeshed with a whole set of economic, technological, social, and cultural practices” (Hill xix), scholars continue to engage in extended, often markedly philosophical studies of films themselves. Using analytic methods that owe “much to art history” and literary theories, film scholarship that carefully, intelligently, and sometimes painstakingly explicates meanings created by narrative and cinematic choices in individual films constitutes a line of research that is quite different from work that ‘looks past the screen’ to understand audience reception, regulatory systems (especially censorship), and the many material facets of industrial media production (Smoodin 2). And so, while historical moments of cinephilia might be most readily associated with the art journals and film clubs of the silent era and later with the collection of critics in France and the U.S. who shaped filmmaking and popular taste in the 1960s, one can see that cinephilia still or now finds passionate expression in scholarship that to some degree locates “the site of aesthetic production [in] the mind of the critical spectator” but also aims to achieve an “Arnoldian ideal of critical disinterestedness” that is distinguished by “sensitive response” and informed, circumspect textual analysis (Taylor 150, 157).

The essays in this issue of *The Projector* belong to that engaged line of scholarship that attends closely to individual films or series of films, and thus frames them as works of art or at least as valuable objects for contemplation. Given the essays' hermeneutic orientation that gives priority to interpretation of textual elements, is it perhaps fitting that the first piece, "Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Decalogue* and the Ambiguity of Meaning" by William Verrone, has thematic as well as methodological connections with traditional, Biblical hermeneutic analysis; its nuanced analysis concerns commentary on and moments in the ten-part *Decalogue* film project, which takes as its subject matter "the tenuous relationship of the commandments to modern everyday existence" (Verrone). By carefully tracing the logic of the dramatic conflicts featured in *The Decalogue*, Verrone is able to explicate the secular, humanistic vision that infuses the project. Using examples from various films in the series, Verrone elucidates the paradox that characters discover that they must "contend with their moral dilemmas from the perspective of a solitary being" just as they come to understand that "their ethical choices necessarily involve interactions with others" (Verrone).

With science fiction functioning as one of the most vital forms for exploring existential quandaries in a modern, secular world, it makes sense that a hermeneutic approach would not only be well suited to an analysis of *The Decalogue* but also to the films that are meticulously examined by the other essays featured in this issue. The second piece, "Embryology of the Hyperreal: The *Alien* Films and Baudrillard's Phases of Simulation" by Randy Laist, examines patterns that traverse the four films in the series, *Alien* (Scott, 1979), *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986), *Alien³* (Fincher, 1992), and *Alien Resurrection* (Jeunet, 1997), to explore meanings that emerge from the visual and narrative changes that separate the "70s-style gritty realism that influenced Ridley Scott's original film" from the "80s-style escapism" in James Cameron's sequel, and

from the 1990s films directed by David Fincher and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, “both known for their postmodern sensibilities” and both filmmakers who figured into “an era that seemed to become increasingly Baudrillardian the closer it approached the millennial moment that Baudrillard famously speculated would not take place” (Laist). Starting with Stephen Mulhall’s insight that the alien provides a means of exploring our “existential horror” because in its myriad forms and states of being it embodies “the essence of what it means to be,” Laist follows Ripley’s journey from a figure “determined to keep a clear boundary between herself as a subject and the alien as an object” to the point where the “twin enemies from the first three films of the franchise – the alien and the Company – are now literally incorporated into Ripley 8’s being” (Laist). Using Ripley 8 status as a product of “the matrix of the genetic code” to illustrate Baudrillard’s observations about “the hyperreal condition,” Laist then identifies the ways in which the fourth film “provides a fitting fulfillment of the thematic concerns that traverse the series” – from the “implosion of dichotomies” to the “denaturing of reality into the matrix of semiotic codes” to the problem(s) of “feminist political resistance in a universe of monopolistic patriarchy” (Laist).

Whereas Verrone establishes evidence for his analysis by identifying correspondences between films in the ten-part *Decalogue* series and Laist uses a process of comparison and contrast to identify how metaphysical perspectives evolve over the course of the *Alien* films, in the third essay, Christopher Garland supports his textual analysis of scenes in the 1985 science fiction film *The Quiet Earth* by illustrating ways in which the film gives visual and narrative expression to the fraught history of Maori-European relations, which has for decades informed narratives in New Zealand cinema. Garland’s essay entitled “‘I have been condemned to live’: History, Allegory, and a New (Zealand) Tomorrow in Geoff Murphy’s *The Quiet Earth*” also identifies correspondences between the film’s apocalyptic narrative and debates surrounding

New Zealand's anti-nuclear movement, which in the 1980s had created tensions between New Zealand and its former allies, pro-nuclear nations in the Northern Hemisphere. Supported by evidence from the salient aspects of the national cinema from which the film emerged, Garland's comprehensive analysis of the allegorical story about three survivors of an event that has "caused the annihilation of all living beings in New Zealand" and very likely the entire world is thus able to effectively describe the ways in which the film explores post-colonial and modern existential dilemmas (Garland).

Last, as we have sometimes done in the past, we are concluding the issue with an invited essay on a topic that we believe warrants attention in film and media studies. The invited essay, "No Tables at Dorsia: *American Psycho*, Food, and Failed Masculinity" by Mark Bernard, is a succinct analysis of Mary Harron's 2000 film. The essay demonstrates the value of looking closely at food imagery and characters' food behaviors. Bernard's work tacitly builds on the body of scholarship that has helped to define the "food film" genre, which was kick-started by productions such as *Tampopo* (Itami, 1986) and *Babette's Feast* (Axel, 1987) and includes films in which food is a "star" – because food preparation and presentation figure prominently in the story; because food shops, kitchens, dining rooms, commercial kitchens, diners, and other food-producing and food-consuming settings are important; and because characters' food choices and food behaviors are integral to their interactions, dramatic conflicts, and evolving identities (see Bower, 5-6). Yet Bernard's concise essay also departs from the scholarship concerned with the food film genre by focusing on the way a film's ostensibly incidental uses of food imagery, food settings, and food behaviors can anchor analyses about the ideological or philosophical implications of its narrative and filmic design. His writing on food and film has been published in *Food, Culture, and Society* and can be found in *The Politics of Food and Film* (forthcoming).

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Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Decalogue* and the Ambiguity of Meaning



William Verrone

As protests against *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988) and debates surrounding *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) suggest, incorporating recognized religious elements in a film can be a decidedly risky practice. Yet the awards and critical acclaim garnered by *The Decalogue* (1989), directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski and written by Kieslowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz, indicate that this project, composed of ten one-hour films first shown on Polish television, explores narratives loosely tied to the Ten Commandments in ways that can speak to audiences with differing views about the Bible. As writing about *The Decalogue* reveals, the film project has prompted a range of responses, among them anguish, empathy, identification, debates about faith, and discussions about inter- and intra-personal relationships. Yet these responses reflect the shared view that the philosophical quandaries embodied by the characters allow audiences to consider not just identifiable socio-cultural ideologies but also the complex and ambiguous meaning that the commandments might have in contemporary daily life.

The very subject matter – the tenuous relationship of the commandments to modern everyday existence – provides the opportunity for audiences to become active viewers, in part because the characters in the films face dilemmas and crises that are

personal yet ultimately universal in scope, generating a “value of empathy” where “[e]mpathizing with others makes available to us possibilities for our *own* emotional development” (Neill 192). The film’s ecumenical framework for approaching the commandments as both a unifying and divisive “list of governing rules” provides Kieslowski with the lens through which to examine complicated relationships between people in modern, secular society. Kieslowski’s *Decalogue* thus takes on problems of modern “spiritual” identity and the quest for meaning and answers to unnerving questions that are too often unanswerable. By focusing on characters’ attempts to establish a “true” sense of self, the films reveal their difficulties in creating an authentic identity through self-analysis, interaction with others, deed, or accomplishment. In the films’ exploration of metaphysical dilemmas in modern society, Kieslowski suggests that a complete truth will never be revealed but that the pain of living is what constitutes ambiguous morality.

Kieslowski’s work suggests that the commandments are not easily understood or interpreted in modern society because their meanings are ambiguous. Thus, the ten films that make up *The Decalogue* are not religious tracks but instead explore spirituality and the metaphysical – both areas of modern, personal reflection and theoretical conjecture. As Joseph Kickasola proposes, “the episodes in *The Decalogue* never function as a ‘thou shalt not’ proclamation, but rather as an investigation of why one would desire to break the commandments in the first place” (239). In other words, what the films show us are people who have transgressed in some fashion, either willingly and knowingly as the young killer in *Decalogue 5*, or more ambiguously, as in *Decalogue 7*, which is a story about possession, the complex relations between a child and her parents, and the “false domesticity” that people often create to sustain a sense of hope. *Decalogue 2* is a story

about a woman contemplating an abortion that hinges upon whether or not her dying husband will recover. Here, the film focuses on the way others affect personal identity and moral choice, which is a point reiterated throughout the films. Significantly, the films suggest that inner, moral choice is often dependent on others' perceptions, despite one's ability and responsibility to act alone. *The Decalogue* is a monumental statement about modern society, about individuals searching for identity, about the ambiguity of meaning, and about the difficulties of adhering to or breaking rules, or in this case, the commandments.

While each of the ten films that make up *The Decalogue* were retroactively given titles that aligned them with a specific commandment, the films are not overtly religious in nature and only loosely based on a specific commandment. While Kieslowski is ostensibly concerned with the Biblical Ten Commandments, he populates the series of films with characters that are grounded in a modern place (Poland) and a modern space (a grey apartment complex); that approach creates a decidedly ambiguous connection between film and commandment. Presented with a contemporary setting, audiences are invited to watch the characters "in situations that require [their] immediate and vital [moral] decisions" (Haltorf 79). The films make the characters sympathetic figures but also suggest that they are fundamentally flawed, so that living by rules, even laws dictated by God, is often impossible.

The Decalogue presents audiences with ordinary people caught in moments of spiritual crisis. This is not to say that the films that make up *The Decalogue* should be interpreted as explicitly religious (religion and spirituality being different things). Instead, the films seem to be authentic accounts of secular spiritual crisis because they feature a

documentary-like aesthetic that avoids didactic, dogmatic, and sermonizing tendencies. Kieslowksi's background in documentaries likely contributes to the films' aesthetic and his ability to draw audiences into the world of the fictional characters reveals his ability to "document" the social world. Discussing his documentary-like style, Annette Insdorf notes, "Kieslowksi's [fictional] work developed in this direction, addressing ordinary lives in their poetry and poignancy" (13). Underscoring that point, Charles Eidsvik's analysis of the two expanded *Decalogue* films (*A Short Film about Killing* and *A Short Film about Love*) suggests that Kieslowksi's documentary style is an attempt to mirror a realistic theme. Eidsvik writes "Kieslowksi has found a form to make the struggle for spiritual survival in such a land exciting. The struggle can be filmed by treating stories as if they were real, by treating characters as if they were people, by treating film as if it were always a document" (55). Addressing the (realistic) universality of *The Decalogue* project, Slavoj Žižek argues that Kieslowksi's style was not just "legitimate" but also "necessary" (8). Žižek argues that "to inquire into the concrete social conditions within which Kieslowksi accomplished the turn from socio-political concerns to more global ethico-religious ones" the filmmaker needed to use a documentary-like approach that allowed "universality" to be revealed through "a set of particular conditions" (8). As a look at scenes from the different films in *The Decalogue* should show, Kieslowksi creates a sense of authenticity by exploring the "particular conditions" of the characters' universal dilemmas and by suggesting that in a modern world, people reckon with the Ten Commandments through efforts at spirituality, authentic personal identity, and ethical behavior in interpersonal relationships.

There are several accounts of how Kieslowski got the idea to make a series of films related to the Ten Commandments. One is that he came upon the idea while talking with a friend as they traveled along the streets of Warsaw. Kieslowski is supposed to have noted that when he saw people, the “[t]ension, a feeling of hopelessness, and a fear of yet worse to come, were obvious.” He is reported to have said, “I sensed mutual indifference behind polite smiles and had the overwhelming impression that I was watching people who didn’t really know why they were living” (qtd. in Hames 225). The account highlights the point that Kieslowski made *The Decalogue* as ten films that might be loosely based on the Ten Commandments, but are more fundamentally rooted in the everyday interchanges of ordinary people. *Decalogues 1, 4, and 7* thus concern familial relations. *Decalogue 10* depicts the relationship between two brothers; *Decalogue 6* examines the nature of love.

The ten films in *The Decalogue* do not focus on individual commandments. Instead, each film deals with more than one commandment, so that “the correspondences are more fuzzy, [and] sometimes a story refers to a multitude of commandments” (Žižek 111). In addition, *The Decalogue* is about the moral problems any one might face and, more importantly, how one might deal with them, regardless of the commandment one must heed. The films become universal in scope by exploring problems of greed, love, betrayal, family life, and friendship, and by portraying a large spectrum of concerns familiar to people in essentially any environment.

Kieslowski had made it clear he wanted the films to be representative of any society, in any culture, in any place. “*The Decalogue*,” according to Kieslowski, “is one of the ethical foundations of our society. Everyone is more or less familiar with the Ten

Commandments, and agrees with them, but no one really observes them” (Clapp). It is from this perspective that the films develop their narratives. While one may see the films as reflections of Polish life in the 1980s (which they do indeed chronicle to some extent), the thematic concerns are applicable to almost anyone, which is why the films are so powerful in their enunciation of spirituality, transgression, and the search for meaning and stability. The overlaps in the films and their “displaced” commandments suggest Kieslowski’s attempt to explore the commandments in various life situations. This approach allows us to see the “truth” of the commandment even though it is not literalized and is very often undermined.

For instance, *Decalogue 5* examines murder, but in two separate ways: unpremeditated and court-sanctioned. Thus, it offers a morally ambiguous perspective through which to consider the basic tenet itself. All of the films’ stories revolve around the choices people make, and the ethical or moral problems that coincide with such decisions. While those problems are arguably the basis for many narrative films, in *The Decalogue* series the moral complexity involved in characters’ decision making is heightened because the narratives touch on the commandments. As Joseph Kickasola suggests, “Regardless of one’s theological commitments, the commandments demarcate ten universal arenas of moral choice [which] are the loci of our most important decisions as humans, and Kieslowski shows how rich and complicated these arenas are” (161). That the narrative of each film is loosely connected with a specific commandment is not the chief concern for Kieslowski. Rather, the engaging aspect of the films is that the fundamentally flawed characters enact moral dramas that reflect and refract the commandments. Kieslowski aims for the universal, not the overtly political or ideological

(a prominent concern in 1980s Poland and his earlier films), and so frames each narrative to explore the way individuals behave in difficult ethical situations.

The characters make spiritual decisions about freedom, identity, transcendence in the process of living with the consequences of their actions that arise from their beliefs, passions, or codes of behavior. For example, the young boy of *Decalogue 5* decides to kill for no apparent reason; the protagonist of *Decalogue 8*, a philosophy professor, lies in order to protect a child; and the scorned husband in *Decalogue 9* hides in a closet to spy on his cheating wife. Discussing the way the fictional characters might resemble anyone, Kieslowski explains, “You have criteria, a hierarchy of values. And that’s what I think proves that we have a sense of what is right and wrong and that we are in a position to see our own, inner compass” (qtd. in Stok 150). Rather than having characters enact the commandments, Kieslowski asks them simply to be *human*, to be questioning, yet authentic and morally lost, following a flawed “inner compass.” While their behaviors appear to be superficial, the characters never seem artificial or representational. For instance, in *Decalogue 1*, the young boy’s spiritual crisis is instigated by the death of a neighbor’s dog. He is lectured about mortality by his father, who takes a scientific perspective, and his aunt, who takes a theological point of view. However, when the boy dies, the father first searches for scientific answers on his computer and then overturns the Madonna statue in a nearby church as if to blame God.

The Decalogue films are demanding because they allow ambiguity to remain. Their power resides in the way they reveal how and why people spiritually transgress. Yet the characters are presented in a sympathetic light, and the films suggest the need to constantly strive for a spiritual center, no matter how destructive or enlightening it may

be. *Decalogue 2*, for example, is the story of a woman who becomes pregnant by a man other than her husband. She confesses her transgression to her husband's doctor, who refuses to pass judgment on the woman. After the husband miraculously recovers, he enthusiastically tells the doctor that he and his wife are having a child, and the doctor remains silent, knowing the truth. To transgress in this context means to seek a personal, subjective way of living ethically. In other words, the characters transgress the way they are told to behave (e.g., through the commandments) and instead seek meaning and justice through personal action and interaction. Here again, characters' search for spiritual meaning does not involve following religious precepts. Hence, *The Decalogue* is more secular than religious in nature since the characters, according to Kieslowski, are "caught in a struggle precisely because of these [difficult situations] and not other circumstances [that] are fictitious but which would occur in every life" (qtd. in Stok 145). Put another way, the films depict the lives of ordinary people caught in complicated ethical circumstances.

While almost all of the films have a tinge of melancholy or hopelessness, there are moments of humor and redemption – or the suggestion that redemption is possible. The young boy in *Decalogue 6*, for instance, having been humiliated by the woman he spies on, gets to face her again at the end of the film when she comes to see him at his job. They say nothing but do exchange glances through the thick pane of glass. Similarly, the brothers in *Decalogue 10* find grace through the bond they develop through their egoistic coveting of the stamp collection. To some extent, then, the series is not without hope; indeed, the possibility for spiritual growth and reconciliation exists throughout.

The films suggest that life choices are sometimes too complex to make when we are in the midst of transgression. Thus, the characters continually seek understanding, but it is never easy to achieve. The father/daughter relationship in *Decalogue 4*, for instance, hinges upon their attraction to one another, an ethical dilemma that stems from a taboo moral situation. According to Slavoj Žižek, “Kieslowski’s topic is ethics, *not* morality: what actually takes place in each of the installments of his Decalogue is the shift from morality to ethics. The starting point is always a moral commandment, and it is through its very violation that the hero(ine) discovers the proper ethical dimension” (137). Arguably, this is why the films are less religious in a biblical sense, and more applicable to the daily conditions and incidents that shape modern ethics. The commandments by nature serve as limitations; each film thus represents the attempt to *deal with* these limitations, though not in any overt fashion. In this way, transgression is not negative; it simply suggests that the characters cross boundaries in search of meaning. In essence, “[w]hat *The Decalogue* gives us, are plausible people plausibly adrift in a world where their moral and spiritual lives are tinted in varying shades of grey” (Clapp). This results in their need to try to make connections with others, and to seek ways to strengthen their identity and moral compass. The characters in the films try to do that but rarely succeed, which makes them and their situations recognizable and makes the protagonists often very sympathetic. The father in *Decalogue 1*, for example, has a connection with his child, but it is built upon false pretenses and when the boy drowns, it is too late for reconciliation. The boy and the woman in *Decalogue 6* attempt an awkward courtship, only to remain disconnected. And the brothers in *Decalogue 10* are both too self-centered and concerned with making their lives better to become truly ethical individuals. Yet each

of these films (and the others in the series) is an example of characters attempting to locate meaning through individual contemplation and connection with others.

Kieslowski establishes various ways for audiences to associate commandments with the films. Marek Haltof explains that the “open structure of *Decalogue* invites the viewer to interpret the actions of Kieslowski’s protagonists, to follow their struggles with destiny in [an] abundance of chance encounters, symbols, allusions, ambiguity, deliberate slow pace, laconic dialogue and a number of recurring motifs (such as the bottle of milk: sipped, frozen, spilled and delivered)” (79). In other words, *The Decalogue* uses multiple symbols, allusions, metaphors, and motifs to convey meaning and establish connections among the various characters. To create metaphoric meaning, the films will use a pane of glass that separates people (*Decalogue 1, 6*) or the apartment complex itself, which is a large, nondescript entity that both confines and invites communion in its halls, pathways, or stairwells. While the symbolism of specific details is not always clear, the mise-en-scène conveys the sense that the films’ world is filled with meaning and significance.

The Decalogue captures the struggles of individuals in a fictional form but in settings that belong to everyday life. For instance, the drab Warsaw apartment complex represents an ostensibly real world of real people who correspond to figures who might belong simply to reality or be caught in allegorical narratives about the commandments. The apartment building suggests a spiritual wasteland that entraps the protagonists. The housing complex is a cold war relic, gargantuan, grey, and dotted with tiny windows and door frames. Kieslowski has explained: “We decided to locate the action in a large housing estate, with thousands of similar windows framed in the establishing shot [so that while the estate] looks pretty awful . . . the fact that the characters all live on one estate

brings them together” (qtd. in Stok 146). Indeed, home life, family, cohabitation and chance encounters occur in almost every film. And within this “community, Kieslowski probes the strained cohabitation for true human connections. In this fragile, personal arena, he confronts us with the heaviest issues in human experience” (Kickasola 165).

Characters do leave the apartment building, but they always return. And it is within the confines of the intricately detailed world of the apartment complex that the protagonists engage in small dramas of moral choice, where the little stage represents a larger macrocosm. Characters from all ten of the films appear in other films and so there is always the possibility of connection among these lost and desperate souls. Still, the films emphasize that the confinement in the spaces of the apartment complex hinders such unions. Framing often highlights the limited space of the rooms. The films create a claustrophobic environment through close-ups on various aspects of the *mise-en-scène*, to show not the characters’ anguish and that their relationships with one another are close yet never really connected. Settings are typically dark and gloomy; “[t]he ugliness and greyness of the dehumanized urban setting dominate the filmic landscape, together with close-ups of the people who endure these harsh conditions” (Haltorf 76).

The characters are trapped by their living conditions and rarely feel empowered enough to make connections with others, even though they need to. If they do, as a young man does in *Decalogue 6* when he spies on a neighbor who eventually invites him to her apartment, they often meet with embarrassment or ruin. Accordingly, “[h]uman interactions in *The Decalogue* invariably yield suffering and pain” (Hames 229), as shown in *Decalogue 1* with the loss of a child, or the attempted love affair in *Decalogue 6*. But the characters’ pain is human and *The Decalogue* shows how precarious authentic

existence is, especially when people are faced with the challenge of being ethical in everyday circumstances. Thus, the films might be anecdotes about the commandments but their focus is on precariousness and complexity of living a “spiritual” modern life.

The overlapping themes in *The Decalogue* – moral ambiguity, choice, identity, ethical responsibility – touch on familiar beliefs and understandings of morality, law, religion, and politics. Yet *The Decalogue* is not didactic but instead makes it possible for audiences to contemplate the meaning of their own lives. As such, the commandments are relevant even though the films ultimately point to the ambiguity of their meaning and the impracticality of following them in contemporary times. Tellingly, the characters in the films do not progress to enlightenment but instead live through dilemmas and crises that shape or re-shape their identities and relations with others. For example, in *Decalogue 4*, the tenuous relationship between a man who may or may not be the father of the young woman with whom he shares a mutual attraction creates not just tension but also, more broadly, the search for identity through relations with others.

These two desperate characters exemplify the overarching theme of the series, which is that “Kieslowski seems to be highlighting the importance of our choice in our relationship roles. In whatever ways biology, society, or circumstances define us, ultimately we also have volition in determining the contours of meaning in our relations with others” (Kickasola 199). In this sense, *The Decalogue* does not present us with a moralizing treatise on how to live according to the commandments, but rather, allows us to contemplate when such rules or laws typically guide us (or are supposed to guide us). Whether exploring the role of the Sabbath (as shown in *Decalogue 3*) or theft (*Decalogue 7*), the films are grounded in the everyday realities of the characters, and so show that it is

impossible to live according to something “pre-ordained” because modern life is far too complicated and ambiguous. As Kieslowski has noted, crossing limits “has nothing to do with any description or exact definition of right and wrong [but instead] with concrete everyday decisions” (qtd. in Stok 149).

The Decalogue reveals how people turn inward and away from others when they lack guidance or fear change. Although the major characters in each film interact with others, they make decisions and contend with their moral dilemmas from the perspective of a solitary being; any film in the series shows this idea, from the distraught father in *Decalogue 1* to the cheating wife in *Decalogue 9*. Recognizing that burden of autonomy, Kieslowski observes “We’re always trying to find a way out. But we’re constantly imprisoned by our passions and feelings [because we] can’t get rid of this...freedom [that] lies within” (qtd. in Stok 150).

In *The Decalogue* films, the characters’ experience of being solitary individuals actually arises out of their attempts to live according to established, external principles. As Mirosław Przyłipiak explains, “practically all the protagonists in *The Decalogue*” are initially confined to a form of existence governed by rules that “have become narrow format rules, hemming in all those who comply with them” (qtd. in Hames 226). Over the course of a film, a character’s feeling of imprisonment eventually “takes the form of a (spiritual) dilemma [in which the] binary logic of the Law (signified by obedience or breach), until now willingly accepted, suddenly turns out to be irrational and unbearable (qtd. in Hames 226). In other words, the characters come to recognize their own authentic individuality when complex and painful ethical dilemmas show them that life does not square with the simple, schematic picture of a world in which actions do or do not

conform to “the rules.” They come to understand that, on the one hand, their ethical choices necessarily involve interactions with other people and that, on the other, as individuals they necessarily stand alone when they make personal, ethical choices.

The Decalogue's (secular) humanistic orientation depends in part on the fact that throughout the ten films there is only one explicit moment of religious iconography. *Decalogue 1* is a story about a father grieving over his son's “illogical” death. “In a striking image, the father knocks over an altar in grief, causing a candle to drip down the face of the Virgin Mary icon like paraffin tears” (Cummings). The moment is “an enigmatic and yet wholly appropriate beginning to a series confronting the harsh realities of daily life in dialectical relationship to its metaphysical values” (Cummings). It is also a devastating image that sets the sad, yet redemptive tone of the film project. The father's rage and sorrow are given visual expression by the “tears” of the Virgin Mary at the same moment that he violates the first commandment by raging against God. According to Žižek, “Decalogue 1 sets the basic matrix of the entire series: the intrusion of the meaningless Real which shatters complacent immersion in socio-symbolic reality and thereby gives rise to the desperate questions: What do you really want from me? Why did it happen?” (123). Here, the death of the son causes the man's rage at God and makes him feel that he is utterly alone.

Here and elsewhere, *The Decalogue* explores the loneliness and alienation that can cause individuals to feel disconnected and can lead to a (spiritual) search for or journey (transgression) toward something. How should one create an identity, from solitary contemplation or the desire for companionship? In *The Decalogue* the answer is both. The spiritual quality of the ten films is palpable and it suggests a polemic against

strict religiosity. Describing the impetus for the films and their (secular) thematic content, Kieslowski explains that he and co-author Krzysztof Piesiewicz “thought about a lot” a series of ethical questions “when we were working on *Decalogue*”; these include: “What, in essence, is right and what is wrong? What is a lie and what is truth? What is honesty and what is dishonesty? And what should one’s attitude to it be?” (qtd. in Stok 149). With the focus on how characters face the challenge of adhering to ethical principles like the commandments, *The Decalogue* easily links questions of “God’s will and wrath” to non-religious dilemmas “of right and wrong, of illness, loneliness, betrayal, rudeness, mid-life crisis, life and death” (Jordanova 112).

With their individuality and dignity arising from the fact that they are outmatched by the complexities of human existence, all of the characters seem to yearn for contact with another even though this desire inevitably leads to frustration and alienation. That trajectory is perhaps most clear in *Decalogue 5*, a loose interpretation of “Thou Shalt not Kill.” The film, probably the best known of the series, was released as a feature called *A Short Film about Killing*. *Decalogue 5*, which examines the ethics of killing, is not an edifying lesson. Instead, “[l]ike the other films in the series, *Decalogue 5* features the commandment, not as a didactic point or lesson, but as ground for the articulation of modern ethical complexities” (Kickasola 193). The horrific seven-minute killing scene presents the murderer as despicable because there is no apparent reason for the boy to kill the taxi driver. Yet because the film also shows the cold, flawless efficiency of the boy’s execution, it also calls into question the ethical basis of state-sanctioned murder in the form of capital punishment.

The ethical complexities explored by films such as *Decalogue 5* are, in a sense, witnessed by the “angel” character who is the only character found in all of the films. This character has been seen as a bridge between the physical and the metaphysical. As Marek Haltof suggests, “The enigmatic angel-like character appears in some decisive scenes of *Decalogue*, during moments in which the fates of the protagonists are determined. The Angel of Fate glues the series together and adds an almost metaphysical dimension” (81). Though he is not an angel and therefore not a clear religious figure, the presence of the “watcher” does point to a larger, metaphysical realm of interconnectedness. Kieslowski has remarked, “There’s this guy who wanders around in all the films. I don’t know who he is; just a guy who comes and watches . . . He doesn’t have any influence on what’s happening, but he is a sort of sign or warning to those whom he watches” (qtd. in Stok 158-159).

In *Decalogue 1*, the figure warms himself by a fire beside the lake where the boy drowns. In *Decalogue 4*, he passes the protagonist during moments of decision-making, first when she burns an important letter and then later when she tells her father about it. In *Decalogue 5*, just before the young boy kills the taxi driver, the film shows the “watcher” crossing the street. There is no indication that he is a figure of fate. Instead, he appears in scenes as a silent witness. He never speaks or judges, but his presence signifies the possibility of omniscience. Kickasola proposes that the idea that one can “know the truth about another person through unlimited observational power – indeed, divine omniscience” helps to explain the presence of the “watcher” (234).

The “watcher” is a potentially spiritual presence who tacitly guides some characters to question their actions. Kieslowski has explained “He leads the characters to

think about what they are doing...his intense stare engenders self-examination” (Insdorf 73). The way that the films are edited suggests the “watcher” is aware of the characters’ actions as they continuously struggle to make sense of them. His gaze does not suggest judgment but instead an acknowledgement of their challenges. Whatever his role, he ultimately represents various positions, issues, and perspectives, never moralizing, yet always attentive and cognizant of those around him. He simply watches, as we do, seeing the external world but never fully knowing the inner world of the characters.

The irony and lack of closure in *Decalogue 10* that establishes an unassailable distance between the film and the audience approximates the distance between “watcher” and the other characters in the films. *Decalogue 10* is about two brothers who inherit their recently deceased father’s stamp collection. The film returns to the first commandment against worshipping a false God and explores the tenth commandment against coveting. The stamp collection is stolen and each brother initially accuses the other of the theft. While their reconciliation seems to provide closure for *The Decalogue* series, song lyrics heard during the film disrupt that stability. Artur, one of the brothers, is in a punk band and we see them perform a song whose lyrics invoke the Ten Commandments. He sings:

Kill, kill, kill
Screw who you will
Lust and crave
Pervert and deprave
Every day of the week
Every day of the week
On Sunday hit mother
Hit father, hit brother
Hit sister, the weakest
And steal from the meekest
Cause everything’s yours
Yeah everything’s yours

The song runs over the final credits of *Decalogue 10* and thus creates an ironic end to the series in that it seems to encourage people to transgress. As Kickasola notes, the film project “essentially ends telling people to sin again [and this] wry, sarcastic smile from Kieslowski keeps us from tying up the story too neatly” (Kickasola 241).

Although *Decalogue 10* ends on an upbeat note with the brothers’ reunion, its conclusion is ambiguous, just as the basis for ethical choices in the modern world remain ambiguous. *The Decalogue* represents the complexities of modern existence as it explores the confused spiritual striving of its characters. While not religious, the films suggest that characters’ suffering is related to the lack of spirituality in daily life, at least as it is experienced in 1980s Poland. *The Decalogue* suggests that the Ten Commandments intersect insofar as they “command” obedience from people and that they are anachronistic because experienced reality does not conform to the simple binary of following or not following the commandments. An astonishing examination of modern morality, the film project shows how the attempt to discover meaning in one’s existence involves a mysterious convergence of the various means by which individuals try to control the uncontrollable, to harness meaning in a meaningless world. Ultimately, *The Decalogue* shows the ineffable dignity of facing ethical challenges.

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**Embryology of the Hyperreal:
The *Alien* Films and Baudrillard's Phases of Simulation**



Randy Laist

Stephen Mulhall's *On Film* is both an eloquent statement on the nature of the film medium and a definitive interpretation of the *Alien* series of science-fiction movies. Mulhall's identification of the four *Alien* films as significant works of cinematic artistry thrusts these movies into the canon of film criticism in a way that encourages us to revisit the saga and supplement Mulhall's observations. Slavoj Žižek's critical commentary on the *Alien* movies extends Mulhall's basic thesis that the films are primarily concerned with the existential horror that the alien "is not so much a particular species [but rather] the essence of what it means to be a species, to be a creature, to be a natural being" (Mulhall 19). Žižek goes on to describe the alien as a perfect representation of Lacan's lamella, the shapeless monster of reality that resists all of mankind's attempts to understand, control, and kill it. Indeed, Ridley Scott's original *Alien* (1979), as well as its 1986 James Cameron sequel, *Aliens*, lend themselves to psychoanalytic and neoanalytic readings. In both films, the typical Freudian elements are all in place: a shadowy and sexualized monster representing the unconscious haunts the corridors of socio-economic activity. Both films begin and end with the characters emerging from and entering into "hypersleep," a

symbolic effect that frames both films within the typically Freudian landscape of dream-space. The first movie draws self-consciously on the surrealist tradition of Freudian motifs to generate its unsettling effects, while the second movie builds its narrative around the Freudian model of trauma and catharsis.

In the third movie (David Fincher, 1992), however, the classical Freudian paradigm, although still applicable in many ways, is problematized by Ripley's genetic fusion with the alien. Rather than a conflict of ego and id, or of the reality-principle against the pleasure-principle, Ripley's story becomes defined by a convergence of such dichotomies, a thematic development that recalls Jean Baudrillard's description of hyperreal implosion: "there is just a sort of contraction into each other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapsing of the two traditional poles into one another" (*Simulations* 57). Baudrillard explains that this variety of "implosion in meaning ... is where *simulation* begins" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 31, italics in original). At the end of *Alien*³, the only way Ripley can kill the alien is to kill herself, and vice versa. This mutual imbrication of Ripley and the alien becomes even more pronounced in the final movie of the series, *Alien Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997), which completes the movement of the franchise as a whole from psychological realism to genetic hyperrealism. The victory of confrontation and purgation achieved at the end of *Aliens* is reconfigured at the end of *Alien Resurrection* as a victory of irony and post-human hybridity. For this reason, it is necessary to supplement the existential and Lacanian commentaries of the *Alien* series articulated by Mulhall and Žižek with a critical approach that reflects the movies' developing theme of hyperrealism.

The trend toward implosion and simulation staged in the series of *Alien* movies reflects the gradual hyperrealization of the popular mood and of cinematic styles that is evident between the 1970s and the 1980s in American movies. The 70s-style gritty realism that influenced Ridley

Scott's original film gives way in James Cameron's sequel to 80s-style escapism. The two films from the 1990s reflect the post-Cold War, pre-9/11 preoccupation with questions of ontology. The directors of *Alien*³ and *Alien Resurrection*, David Fincher and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, are both known for their postmodern sensibilities, but, more tellingly, they are both representative filmmakers of an era that seemed to become increasingly Baudrillardian the closer it approached to that millennial moment that Baudrillard famously speculated would not take place.

Throughout the "long 90s," Cold War dualisms imploded, the Gulf War provided America with a textbook lesson in hyperreality, the president's personal life became a public spectacle, and new technologies such as virtual reality, cloning, the internet, and CGI cinematography presented a challenge to conventional models of reality. Films such as *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994), *The Matrix* (Larry and Andy Wachoski, 1999), and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) capture the hyperreal mood of this era. As Žižek's American publisher has said, "Baudrillard was the philosopher who fit with the era of *Seinfeld*" (Robinson). In charting the progressively simulacral career of the alien, we can perceive a strain of the dialogue that the culture is having with itself about the shifting nature of reality. In fact, a one-to-one correlation is rather easy to discern between the representation of the alien in the four *Alien* movies and Baudrillard's "successive phases of the image":

It is the reflection of a profound reality;
It masks and denatures a profound reality;
It masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
It has no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6).

Ripley's increasingly convoluted relationship with the alien over the course of the film series reflects an increasing complexity in the structure of her reality. Considering this development

within a Baudrillardian framework allows us to perceive the manner in which the filmmakers have relied on this theme to establish thematic consistency among the different films, as well as to observe the manner in which the installments of the film series variously represent the opportunities for political resistance available to hyperreal subjects in a hyperrealized cosmos.

Ridley Scott's *Alien* stages a nightmare of a hostile "profound reality." Despite being a post-*Star Wars* science fiction film, *Alien* rejects the giddy operatics of the many films which strove to mimic George Lucas's blockbuster. Like Scott's next film, *Blade Runner* (1982), *Alien*'s visual and narrative styles place it firmly in the cinematic camp of 70s realism alongside films like *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), and *Midnight Express* (Alan Parker, 1978). In *Alien*, space is not an open terrain of freedom and adventure as it is in *Star Wars*, but a stark and lonely void of perpetual menace. This is not the kind of space that calls its inhabitants out into expansive gestures of self-transcendence, but rather the kind of endless night that turns its inhabitants in on themselves. The *Nostramo* crew huddling around the mess hall table for nourishment and companionship inhabits a meager and fragile bubble of light in a void that is both spatial (they are months away from earth's solar system) and temporal (their hypersleep has been momentarily interrupted). Space is disenchanted in the *Alien* universe; rather than providing an escape from reality, space in *Alien* emphasizes the immediacy and inescapability of reality. Space is precisely what makes escape from the clanking, bloody reality of the *Nostramo* impossible.

Likewise, technology is similarly disenchanted. The translucent technology of conventional science fiction is replaced in *Alien* by whirring and clicking boxes of frequently malfunctioning moving parts. As in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), the ship's computer turns against the human crew of the *Nostramo* in an ultimate depiction of the

unreliability of technology. Whereas in Kubrick's film, however, the computer glitch was overcome and the transcendent future made possible, in *Alien*, the glitch is not in the computer, but in the materialistic values of corporate capitalism. The ship's computer, Mother, and the android, Ash, are doing exactly what they were programmed to do by the military-industrial society which built them and which is willing to sacrifice the human crew in order to obtain a valuable new bioweapons product. This "glitch" is not de-programmable, the only solution is to blow up the entire superstructure *in toto*, as Ripley finally does. In the same way that the characters in *Alien* dress, speak, and socially interact in "realistic" 1970s blue collar fashion, the politics of the *Alien* universe reflects the real social pathology of contemporary late capitalist culture. *Alien* is not an escapist film, but a film about the impossibility of escaping the reality of our contemporary world.

This theme of the inescapability of reality is personified most vividly in the figure of the alien itself. The crew of the *Nostramo* exists within a world that is entirely technological, and in which even their natural rhythms of sleep and wakefulness are controlled by a computer. Everything aboard the spaceship is geometrical, sterilized, and inorganic. It is a world that strives toward a complete elimination of the "profound realities" of sex and death. The alien infects this world with the violent challenge posed by the return of the repressed. If the first scene in which Kane wakes up from his cryotube against a hospital-white backdrop represents a bloodless, bodiless vision of birth, the violence with which the newborn alien bursts out of Kane's chest in the middle of the film enacts a birth that is gruesomely biological. The Euclidian spaces of the *Nostramo*'s interior are eroded by the acidic blood of the alien, which etches chaotic shapes into flat sheets of metal and plastic. The alien itself, in its shadowy amorphousness, presents a visual contrast to the superficial visibility of the spaceship's metal surfaces.

Moreover, when the crew members squabble at the beginning of the movie about their contractual obligations, they assume the integrity of a social contract that defines the relationship between themselves and their employers. The presence of the alien on board the *Nostramo* exposes the fictive nature of this contract, disclosing the “profound reality” of capitalist amorality. The Company – the world-monopoly that owns the ship – is more responsible for the death of the crew than the alien itself, making the alien a kind of proxy for the capitalists. The violence inherent in capitalism that had been repressed during the workers’ conversation of who gets what shares of the profits bursts forth in the figure of the alien to make apparent the true nature of capitalist ethics.

One other aspect of *Nostramo* society that the alien embodies is the specter of sexual difference. The human crew of the *Nostramo* is composed of four men and two women who all seem to work in a post-sexist environment of gender equality. Ripley and Lambert work alongside their male colleagues in what appears to be an ideal scenario of liberal workplace mutuality. Throughout the first half of the movie, no reference is made to Ripley or Lambert’s femaleness. This post-gender utopia is upset first by a lewd reference to cunnilingus Parker makes to Lambert in the mess hall, and then, immediately following, by the grotesque eruption of the alien out of Kane’s chest, as if the alien were the physical manifestation of what Anita Hill would later refer to as “the beast” of sexual harassment (207). In its pornographically hermaphroditic morphology, in the horrific variety of ways it exposes the vulnerabilities of human flesh, and in its reproductive strategy of oral rape and parasitism, the alien is a perfect embodiment of the sexual violence which simmers beneath the surface of the *Nostramo*’s floating technotopia.

For all the senses in which *Alien* attempts to evoke the mood of a fundamentally horrifying reality, it also contains the germs of a discourse of hyperrealism that would become more prominent in the second half of the series. As already mentioned, the hypersleep out of which *Alien*'s characters emerge at the beginning of the movie and to which Ripley returns at the end imparts a dream-like quality to the entire narrative. Psychoanalytic approaches to dreams emphasize the relationship between the coded dream-content and the dreamer's real psychic economy in waking life. In *Simulations*, however, Baudrillard deconstructs the psychoanalytic bias that considers the unconscious to be "more true" (6) than the symptoms it produces, referencing dreams as perfect example of the unconscious simulating itself. The Baudrillardian dream is one dreamt in outer space, in a vacuum, or, as Baudrillard likes to say, "in orbit," a system of signs that is not grounded in any prior reality. "Hypersleep" would indeed be a fittingly Baudrillardian moniker for dreaming as understood in this manner. The science fiction genre provides a metaphorical representation of the sense in which a community can exist in this kind of Baudrillardian suspension. Science fiction itself, moreover, is a project of rule-making that demands only that it be internally consistent, without any necessary mimetic referentiality to any "real" world. This is one reason why Baudrillard and science fiction have always found so much to say to one another. *Alien* blends its gritty realism with the oneiric iconography of science fiction in a way that unsettlingly bends the real and the fantastic into one another.

This tendency in the film stands against the attempts of its main character, Ripley, to resist the forces of implosion by securing symbolic borders. Like a filmmaker working in the realist mode, she is determined to keep a clear boundary between herself as a subject and the alien as an object. The most monstrous threat the alien poses is the threat of the violation of personal and social borders. Not only does the alien violate the borders of the human body

through its parasitic form of reproduction, but it also embodies a number of other symbolic violations. In its bodily commingling of phallic and vaginal shapes, by impregnating male human beings, and through the asexual gender of the adult warrior aliens, the alien threatens the border between male and female. Its body furthermore seems to blend organic and inorganic elements – its exoskeleton seems to have evolved to blend in perfectly with the cables, ducts, and pipes of a spaceship interior, even as its body drips with an excessive amount of slime, evoking an unmistakably organic nature. H. R. Giger, the artist who designed the alien, achieves his most uncanny effects by depicting a nightmarish fusion of living and nonliving forms.

Ripley's war against the alien is simultaneously a war against the semantic contamination threatened by the breach of these borders. She adamantly refuses to break the quarantine rules for the ostensibly humanitarian purpose of allowing Kane access to medical help. Her attempts to defend an aseptic environment are subverted however by Ash, the android who, we come to recognize, has more in common with the alien than he does with the human beings. The parallelism between the alien and the Company of which Ash and Mother are extensions is the movie's most disturbing representation of the evaporation of the stable boundaries that make a realist ontology possible. The alien is driven not by any human purpose, but by a blind instinct to reproduce, a runaway program that has no reference to anything but its own self-propagation. The revelation that Ash and Mother are just as rapacious as the alien suggests that economics and techno-science are motivated by the same self-reflexive code. The body and the mind, the animal world and the human world, the organic and the inorganic principles operate according to the same senseless code.

Ripley, fighting a war on two fronts between the genetic code of the alien on one side and the digital code of the intelligent computers on the other side, struggles to keep a space open for

a classical humanist model of selfhood. Her escape on the shuttle, tellingly christened *Narcissus*, indicates the extent to which her struggle to survive is really a struggle to preserve the boundaries of autonomous subjectivity from dissolution in the hyperreal codes that characterize the alien and the machines, even as it suggests that the urge to remain “unviolated” in this way is essentially solipsistic (and indeed, the alien manages to penetrate even into this inner sanctum of selfhood). At the same time, therefore, that Ripley’s fight against the alien is a fight against the return of repressed reality, Ripley also defines herself as a warrior against postmodern deconstructions of gender, personal identity, and reality itself.

If *Alien* dramatizes the representation of a profound reality in the figure of the alien, the 1986 sequel reflects Baudrillard’s observation about the second stage of simulation in which the image “masks and denatures” a profound reality. Where *Alien* aroused our fear by depicting the profound reality embodied by the titular beast, *Aliens* defines its narrative as the project of exorcising the trauma of this primordial reality from consciousness altogether, flushing it reciprocally out of the cargo hold of the *Sulaco* and out of the heads of Ripley, Newt, and the audience, in emulation of Newt’s plastic doll. Burke, mouthing the platitudes of the “trauma culture” which flourished throughout the 1980s for his own insidious purposes, tells Ripley that the only way to stop her bad dreams is to go back to the scene of the originary traumatic event and do battle with her inner demons on their own turf.

This model of trauma addresses the reality of the originary traumatic experience, even as it domesticates this reality by defining it as one which is subject to human control. In the tradition of signature 80s films such as *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) and *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), *Aliens* insists on the possibility of reenacting traumatic experiences in a way that expunges them of the fearsome indomitability that characterizes real

reality. In doing so, *Aliens* participates in the project of what Robin Wood called “papering the cracks” (144) of Reaganite civilization. James Cameron has explained that he conceived of the ill-fated mission of the film’s Colonial Marines “as analogous to the inability of superior American firepower to conquer the unseen enemy in Vietnam” (*Time*). In this sense, the trauma that *Aliens* revisits is the American political trauma, and although Cameron’s marines do suffer a rout, the end of this representation of the war has a “happy ending”: the complete extermination of the enemy by a nuclear explosion.

This revised representation of the conflict in Vietnam (and of post-colonial wars more generally) serves to mask the historical reality. At the same time, the same element of the story provides what Wood calls “reassurance” regarding nuclear technologies. Rather than threatening human survival, nuclear power in *Aliens* facilitates human survival. Moreover, although Ripley’s original plan is to “nuke the entire site from orbit,” it is actually a meltdown at a nuclear facility which winds up causing the explosion that (apparently) exterminates the entire colony of aliens. Not only does this well-timed meltdown reconceive of the ultimate nuclear disaster scenario as a beneficent turn of events, but it also suggests that nuclear technologies are working with Ripley to bring about the holocaust she desires. In this sense, the menacing technologies of *Alien* are “debugged,” and technology itself is restored to its status as servant to man, an idea literally personified by Ripley’s own plastic doll, the good android Bishop, who turns out to be the heroic antithesis of Ash.

Finally the concept of maternity, which *Alien* had represented as a nightmare of blood and creatureliness, is redeemed in *Aliens* through the nuclear family reconstituted in the trio of survivors: Ripley, Hicks, and Newt. Our relief at the survival of these characters, however, deters us from recognizing that Ripley’s new family is simulacral. Ripley remains asexual, and the real

problems of sex and corporeality, like the real historical truth of Vietnam and the real political problem of nuclear technologies, have not been definitively confronted, merely “papered over” by a misleading representation. The queen alien is not destroyed, merely expelled, and there is no reason to assume (as Ripley, uncharacteristically, does in the movie’s final scene) that the perimeter is secure, that the borders of the ship have not been violated by the procreative energies of the alien queen. The fantastic image of the queen blasting out of the airlock masks the fact that traumatic after-effects of the alien encounter literally continue to live on.

Meanwhile, behind the mask, in the social atmosphere of the *Aliens* universe, reality is becoming progressively denatured, dissolving as if it had been splashed with alien blood. While the most memorable spectacle of the film is the war against the aliens, the manner in which the ordinary lifeworld of the *Aliens* universe is represented suggests that earthling society is becoming progressively hyperreal. In a brief scene that was not included in the original theatrical release but which was restored to Cameron’s director’s cut, we see Ripley reposing thoughtfully in what appears to be a verdant landscape. The shot is memorable, because it is the only glimpse in the entire *Alien* saga of a natural human environment. Of course, when the camera pulls back, we see that this landscape is actually a video projection, an artificial representation of nature substituting for the original which, as far as we know about the conditions on earth in the *Alien* universe, may no longer even exist.

This brief glimpse of hyperreal nature is amplified by one of the movie’s central plot points: the planet LV-426, which had been portrayed as unimaginably remote in the first movie, is now being terraformed and colonized. The atmosphere of the entire planet is being made over into a simulacrum of a terrestrial environment, an ecology of the future, in which natural processes and human engineering are so intermixed as to implode the difference between the two

terms. This hyperreal ecology, furthermore, is sponsored and manufactured by the same Company that demonstrated its amorality in the first movie. As one executive tells Ripley, using an appropriately (if anachronistically) commercial reference, LV-426 is home to “a Shake-n-Bake” colony, while the Company’s slogan, “Building Better Worlds” indicates that the Company is literally making over the entire habitable universe in its own image.

Although Ripley has been in cryostasis for 57 years, capitalist morality has not evolved. In *Aliens*, the chief representative of the Company is Burke, the yuppie caricature whose entire personality is a sleazy simulation of sincerity. The only evident moral advancement has taken place in androids. Bishop explains that his model of android is more sophisticated than Ash’s model, and, indeed, Bishop behaves with a humility, kindness, and sense of self-sacrifice that makes him the closest thing in the *Alien* universe to a saint. The android’s moral behavior is no less touching for being cybernetic, and it underscores the absence of morality in the “real” human representatives of the Company. Indeed, the parallelism that *Alien* had established between alien reproduction and capitalist exploitation actually shifts in the alien’s favor, as Ripley, no friend to the alien, concedes that they are more admirable than capitalists. Although both codes are shockingly violent, at least alien code is a reflection of a “profound reality,” while the capitalist code is utterly senseless and altogether detached from any ontological substratum.

In a rousing scene toward the beginning of *Aliens*, Ripley attacks the hyperreal mood of frivolousness she perceives in the Company executives as she tries to explain to them the dire consequentiality of the reality represented by the alien species. Sweeping up their bureaucratic paperwork in her fists, she warns them, “If one of those things gets down here then that will be all, then all of this – this bullshit that you think is so important – you can just kiss all that goodbye.” The board-room itself is situated in an orbital space station, while behind Ripley, ID

photos and data about the members of the *Nostramo* crew exemplify the kind of reality the Company is used to dealing with – legal clauses, adjusted dollar amounts, and administrative resolutions, an echo chamber of self-referential language. In making her stand, Ripley resumes her role as the defender of the reality principle and a guardian of the rigid laws of quarantine. She throws herself bodily between the aliens and the human race as a sort of human prophylaxis. In waging war against the alien, however, she is working to protect the orbital, implosive civilization epitomized by the Company, fighting to destroy the specter of reality in order to make the world safe for hyperreality.

Even though she subverts the Company's attempts to acquire the alien, she is working for the Company in the broader sense of fighting to preserve the earthling civilization that supports their existence. Ripley's unwitting role as the guardian of hyperreal society is appropriate, furthermore, in that, after reviving from a 57-year hypersleep, she herself becomes unmoored from the natural span of her life. She finds herself in the post-human situation of holding a picture of her dead 66 year old daughter while she herself is still in her 30s. Ripley has become a hyperreal entity, made possible through the magic of hypersleep technologies. The nickname of Ripley's adopted daughter, Newt, furthermore, suggests the amphibious quality associated with the alien, even as Ripley's asexual mode of acquiring her looks forward to a post-biological style of human reproduction. Ripley's tacit collusion with the Company, her quality of being "unstuck in time," and her proxy-alien hyper-daughter all work together to suggest that, despite the black-and-white battle lines she draws on LV-426, her destiny in the following films is ultimately to be incorporated into a more ambiguous style of reality.

When Ripley's escape pod crashes on Fiorina 161 in *Alien*³, it seems that she has returned to an atmosphere reminiscent of Scott's original movie. Like *Alien*, *Alien*³ relies more on horror

and suspense to achieve its effects than on action sequences and special effects. The gritty surfaces and earth-tones of *Fury 161* convey an impression that the series is returning us to a more visceral style of reality. The double-Y work-prison has the gritty industrial look – the “grunge” look – that emerged in the early 90s as a kind of nostalgia for sincerity in a hyperreal age. In retrospect, we can see David Fincher’s first feature-length film as a harbinger of what would become his signature style in subsequent films such as *Se7en* (1995) and *Fight Club*, a neo-noir style that captures a superficial picture of 70s-style realism, but which is also hyperstylized in a way that calls attention to the cinematic character of this “realism.” Although the society of *Fury 161* seems like a kind of primal Stone Age territory outside the scope of the hyperreal values of corporate capitalism, close viewing reveals that the entire complex is sprinkled with Weyland-Yutani logos. The prisoners themselves all have bar codes tattooed on the back of their heads. The work-prison planet itself combines labor, incarceration, and ecology in a way that suggests an outrageous nightmare parody of the capitalist lifeworld.

The most conspicuous precursor to the style of *Alien*³ is arguably Fincher’s most successful music video, Madonna’s “Express Yourself,” which is itself an homage to Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). Following the stylistic evolution from *Metropolis* to “Express Yourself” to *Alien*³ presents another opportunity to view the progress through the first three stages of simulacra. In *Metropolis*, Lang crafts iconographic images which are intended to represent the profound reality of class relations. In “Express Yourself,” Fincher borrows Lang’s iconography, but reappropriates it such that the oppressed laborers of Lang’s film become the sweaty beefcakes of Madonna’s sexual fantasy. Clearly, this mutation of the *Metropolis* meme can be said to mask the profound reality to which Lang was directing our attention. In *Alien*³, however, Lang’s subterranean city of worker-slaves is reimagined as a world in which corporate-

capitalist values have permeated every aspect of reality. The apparent remoteness of the planet masks the fact that the Fury 161 work prison is part of the Company's "network." The rowdiness of the male worker-prisoners masks the fact that they are there voluntarily, having decided to continue on as a skeleton crew after the Company closed the foundry-prison. The apparent authority wielded by Captain Andrews masks the fact that the society of Fury 161 relies entirely on "the honor system." The jailers have no weapons and are vastly outnumbered by the prisoners. Jailers and prisoners share the same conditions and it is only role-playing that sustains this society's hierarchical relationships. The realism with which Fincher depicts Fury 161 disguises the fact that the world of *Alien*³ is one in which the ontological distinctions between subject and object on which a conventional model of reality relies have been undermined.

Of course, this implosive momentum is epitomized by Ripley's situation. The narrative tension of the previous two films had been propelled by Ripley's fanatical commitment to keep herself and her companions free from alien contamination. In the opening sequence of *Alien*³, however, a facehugger infiltrates Ripley's cryotube and impregnates her, thereby negating not only all of Ripley's heroic efforts in the previous two films, but also the very ethos of the *Alien* film series as a whole and, moreover, the narratological underpinnings of the genres of horror and suspense. The spatial and ontological separation of Ripley and the alien is what established the terms of safety and danger, life and death, and success and failure in the first two films. With the implosion of the alien and Ripley during the credit sequence of *Alien*³, the narrative tension turns inward, pivoting on Ripley's own self-awareness about the reorganization of her reality.

It takes Ripley a surprisingly long time to discover the truth of her situation. She has been fighting the alien in the traditional subject-object mode for so long that she continues doing so on Fury 161 as if out of sheer force of habit, and her investment in this realist mode of doing battle

blinds her to the truth of her situation, which is that this realist mode of subject-object antagonism is no longer applicable. As soon as she wakes up from her hypersleep, she sets about insisting that the bodies of Newt and Hicks, her dead nuclear family, must be autopsied and incinerated to prevent infection. When a stowaway facehugger impregnates a dog, Ripley dons her timeworn mantle as alien-warrior to protect the universe from the external foe. But for all her paranoia and cunning, it never occurs to Ripley that her sore throat and bouts of nausea are indications that the alien is gestating beneath her own solar plexus. In this way, Ripley's own behavior embodies Baudrillard's description of the third order of simulation in which the image, in this case, Ripley's image of the alien as an external foe, conceals the fact that this reality has undergone implosion.

To be fair to Ripley, however, she cannot be entirely blamed for her failure of insight. For one thing, as she knows as well as we do, when a person is impregnated by a facehugger, they have at best a day or two before they give their fatal birth, whereas Ripley's alien takes much longer to gestate. The alien that gestates in the dog is on the prowl within a day at most, whereas Ripley's alien, which had been implanted before she even arrived on Fury 161, leaps out with perfect, dream-like timing at the most dramatically appropriate moment at the very end of the movie. Ripley and the audience are right to assume that if she had been impregnated on the *Sulaco*, she would be dead by now. Furthermore, the opening sequence shows the facehugger cracking the window of Ripley's cryotube to gain access to her face. In addition to the reasonable supposition that such a happenstance would disrupt the cryogenic process, which it doesn't, when we see Ripley's cryotube after her crash landing on Fury 161, the window is unbroken. It is also difficult to imagine how the alien queen could have managed to smuggle a pair of eggs onto the *Sulaco* at the end of *Aliens*. These discrepancies in the plot of *Alien*³ seem

intentionally arranged to suggest the essentially dream-like relationship that inheres between Ripley and the alien at this point in the series. Instead of a Freudian-style dream, however, in which the alien represents some preexisting psycho-sexual reality, Ripley's Baudrillardian dream is one in which the image of the alien and the image of the dreamer share the same hyperreal condition.

For Ripley as well as for the worker-inmates of Fury 161, reality is not profound; it is embodied – it is self-identical. The fact that Fury 161 is a special prison for men with XYY aneuploidy introduces the theme of genetics explicitly into the *Alien* series. Sentencing to this prison is determined not only or even primarily by what the prisoners have done, but by who they are as expressions of their genotype. This idea of a genetic prison suggests a sense in which all organisms are prisoners of their genetic makeup, implying that the truth of human identity does not lie in the shadowy realms of the past or the unconscious, but is spelled out clearly in every cell of one's body. The inmates' status as genetic prisoners condemns them to be their bodies and to live out a destiny pre-assigned by their genome. When Ripley crashes on Fury 161, she also is condemned to be her genome. While *Alien* and *Aliens* had both depicted societies in which men and women worked together as colleagues in a more or less post-sexist environment (even the marines in *Aliens* brag about their bisexuality), in *Alien*³, Ripley is confronted very directly with her genetic identity as a female. To the all-male planet of Fury 161, Ripley is just as fearsome an alien as any xenomorph. Dillon articulates the concern that “the presence of any outsider, especially a woman – is a violation of the harmony and a potential break in the spiritual unity” of the prison population. The champion of quarantine regulations throughout the first half of the series, Ripley now finds herself quarantined – ordered to remain in the medlab – as an infectious source of mayhem.

Of course, Ripley proves just as adept at undermining human quarantine procedures as the alien. This parallel is one of many clues that Ripley is not just pregnant with the alien, a dynamic which would sustain a differentiation between the two antagonists (the alien is the same external foe, simply relocated inside rather than outside Ripley's physical body), but that she has actually *become* the alien (a hyperreal implosion). For the alien, as we come to learn in greater detail in *Alien Resurrection*, has an appropriately alien twist to its reproductive process. Rather than merely using its host as a gestation site, the alien embryo seems to share genetic information with its host in a way that affects both participants in the exchange. The alien that gestates inside a dog in *Alien³*, for example, takes on perceptibly canine qualities that differentiate it from the previous generations of aliens, more bipedal creatures which, we might assume, walked upright as a result of having gestated inside human beings. A corollary of this quirk in alien embryology is that the genetic transfer seems to go both ways, investing the parent with qualities of the host species. In this sense, Ripley becomes the alien both figuratively and literally throughout *Alien³*. Ripley's genetic and symbolic fusion with the alien is reflected in the way she becomes the object of fear and mystery on the part of the male inmates, but also in her own behavior. In *Alien³*, Ripley has a new aggressive sexuality that we have not seen in her before. She was completely celibate in the first film, and in the second film, her schoolgirlish flirting with Hicks never becomes physical, but in the third film, shortly after waking up from her coma, she bluntly propositions Clemens for sex. Tellingly, she does so as a way of avoiding his inquiries into what caused her to request an autopsy of Newt. Sex with Clemens is therefore a kind of substitute for talking about the alien, as if she were answering his question in a roundabout way, substituting her own sexual identity as a woman for the unspoken name of the alien creature.

This insinuation is accentuated by the fact that, in place of their lovemaking, Fincher's narrative cuts to the movie's first alien death scene. The warden wastes no time in attributing this apparent industrial accident to the emotional turbulence introduced into the community by the arrival of Ripley, and, in a way, his accusation is justified. Ripley's female sexuality parallels the predation of the alien Ripley has brought along with her from outer space. Sigourney Weaver plays Ripley with a predatory, catlike slinkiness that is absent from her tomboyish turn in the previous films, suggesting that the alien is not only in her; it *is* her. Indeed, until the final sequence of the movie kills off all but one resident of Fury 161, Ripley is actually directly responsible for killing more inmates than the alien as a result of her disastrous plan to coat the tunnel walls with an explosive gel.

At the very end of the film, when Ripley is threatening to throw herself into a pool of molten lead as a way of extinguishing once and for all (so she thinks) the dangerous monster that she has become, a figure resembling the android Bishop arrives to dissuade her. Ripley assumes that the figure is another robot of Bishop's model, but he protests that he is actually Bishop's human designer. The introduction of this strange ambiguity at the climax of the movie contributes an important element to Ripley's suicide scene. The audience is never satisfied one way or another considering whether this character is in fact a robot or an organism – there is no reason to take him at his word – and this lack of resolution can be interpreted as a tacit statement that whether someone is a robot or not does not matter. A person or a robot is not defined by the “profound reality” of what lies beneath their skin, but by the actions they perform in the world. The question of whether or not Bishop is a robot is beside the point in a world in which the concept of reality has been emptied of depth. The prisoners are prisoners because they play the

role of prisoners, just as the jailers are defined by the roles they enact. Genetics is destiny for both the prisoners and for Ripley.

In committing suicide to keep herself and her alien baby out of the hands of scientists, Ripley embraces her status as an object and uses it as a terrible kind of power, giving birth to the alien even as she plummets to her death in a poetic convergence of generativity and destruction. While it appears to stage the profound reality of death in all of its dire finality, Ripley's suicide is actually only a disguised continuation. Although we see both alien and Ripley incinerated, the presence of the implosive robot-human Bishop, as well as that of the compellingly named sole survivor of Fury 161, Morse, suggest that a code – the digital code of cybernetic technologies and of genetic identity – constitutes a deathless hyperreality that is indifferent to the humanist categories of life and death.

In keeping with the dynamics of Baudrillard's third stage of simulation, *Alien*³ relies on the audience's intentional willingness to pretend that they don't know what they know. The narrative details of Ripley's attempts to resist alien contamination provide distraction from the fact that we know that Ripley is already terminally contaminated throughout the film. Likewise, at least in retrospect if not originally, our admiration for her act of self-sacrifice at the end of Fincher's film relies on our ability to ignore our knowledge that this suicide is ultimately meaningless, since the Military-Industrial Complex will eventually reverse the result of the suicide in *Alien Resurrection*. Resurrection, however, is not exactly the most appropriate term to describe what happens to Ripley, the alien, or the alien franchise in this fourth installment. All three organisms – heroine, monster, and franchise – undergo a basic genetic mutation that alters them in a fundamental way from what they had been previously.

The character played by Sigourney Weaver in *Alien Resurrection* is, as Call tells her and as that character seems to accept, not Ellen Ripley. Ripley 8, as it is more accurate to call her, has super-strength, acid for blood, alien-intuition, and, most importantly, has lost her fanatical obsession with alien-killing. The alien, correspondingly, is significantly more human than it had been. The implosion of the Ripley-alien dynamic that had been imminent in the series since the first movie, in which Ripley and the alien had both been labeled “survivors,” is now complete, and in this sense, *Alien Resurrection* is a logical successor to the previous *Alien* films. Another unique characteristic of the *Alien* franchise that Jeunet’s film perpetuates is the stylistic subordination of the narrative material to the particular creative stylizations of a visionary director. In the same way that Scott, Cameron, and Fincher each made an *Alien* film reflective of their own stylistic temperament, Jeunet brings to *Alien Resurrection* the same tone of post-apocalyptic whimsy that characterizes his two previous films, *Delicatessen* (1991) and *The City of Lost Children* (1995). Jeunet’s essentially pranksterish sensibilities distinguish *Alien Resurrection* from the haunted atmosphere of the previous *Alien* movies. The genetic soup of *Alien Resurrection* is also significantly inflected by its Joss Whedon screenplay, which is characterized by self-consciously movie-hip dialogue in the Tarantino/comic book mode.

The unique screenwriting and direction that distinguish *Alien Resurrection* as a tonal departure from the previous films accentuate the plot development that the society we encounter in *Alien Resurrection* is two hundred years in the future from the one we left in *Alien*³. The design of *Alien Resurrection* features science-fictional trappings, such as Gediman’s stainless steel pony-tail holder, that the previous *Alien* movies eschewed. Whereas the original *Alien* was remarkable for its sparse, realistic dialogue, Whedon’s space pirates are always full of snappy repartee and action-movie-style zingers. Whedon’s script even includes intertextual echoes to

former *Alien* movies, as in the opening voiceover in which Ripley quotes Newt, or the “I don’t trust anyone” line that Elgin unconsciously borrows from Hicks. These touches emphasize the textuality of *Alien Resurrection*’s filmic world, giving it the ludic, Nabokovian quality of a luminous artificial surface. In Baudrillardian terms, *Alien Resurrection* launches the series into orbit, loosening it from the pull of reality, or revealing that it had always already been so loosened, and indulges in its hyperreal condition of the fourth stage of simulation in which the image “is its own pure simulacrum.”

As a clone produced, as Call put it, “in a fucking lab” by the Military-Industrial Complex, Ripley 8 exemplifies Baudrillard’s assessment that, in the hyperreal condition, there is “No more mother, just a matrix. And henceforth it is the matrix of the genetic code that will ‘give birth’ without end in an operative manner purged of all contingent sexuality” (*Seduction* 169). We first see Ripley curled in a fetal position in a giant test tube, being ogled by the white-coated technicians who have engineered her. A subsequent scene shows these same scientists bloodlessly birthing the alien baby out of her chest with a laser and forceps, demonstrating that both Ripley 8 and her alien offspring are no longer the product of conventional biological processes. Moreover, Ripley 8 is cloned as a full-grown adult. Rather than proceeding through the ordinary experiences of psychosexual development and personality-building, Ripley 8 is entirely a product of the genetic code that has been used to formulate her. Even her memories have been “passed down generationally at a genetic level.” We see her breaking out of a plastic amniotic sack, as if she were being reborn as a techno-scientific “construct.” As a result of her simulacral identity, Ripley 8’s character is free of the existential fears of birth and death that had preyed upon her previously.

In the same way that *Alien*³ subverts narrative expectations by establishing that there is no chance that the heroine will survive until the end of the film, *Alien Resurrection* pulls a similar trick by presenting Ripley 8 as indestructible. Ripley 8's life is rarely at stake throughout the film, which derives very little narrative tension from stoking our fears for the heroine's safety. Sigourney Weaver makes the most of her character's invulnerability, swaggering through the movie as if she were just along for the ride, displaying a cocksure jauntiness that differentiates her from the human Ripley, who had suffered so much emotional agony. As far as the plot goes, indeed, Ripley 8 doesn't have much to worry about. In the same way that the narrative imperative that Ripley remain uninfected was overturned in the opening scenes of *Alien*³, the other major source of tension in the *Alien* series – keeping the alien out of the hands of the bioweapons industry – is dispatched in the opening scenes of *Alien Resurrection*. What action-hero deeds remain to be done are largely shouldered by Call, who takes on Ripley's world-saving mission, leaving Ripley 8 free to concern herself primarily with the question of her own peculiar kind of reality.

Ripley 8 achieves a terrifying glimpse into the nature of this reality when she comes across Room 1-7, a laboratory on board the military-science spaceship *Auriga* in which are housed the seven previous “models” of the Ripley clone. The grotesqueness of Ripley 8's siblings recalls the nightmarish images of distorted organic shapes that background the opening credits of the movie. Once a human body has been reduced to a genetic code, it is available for techno-scientific manipulation. It is no longer an integrated whole; the genetic code can be reorganized like the letters on a scrabble board – the eyes and teeth can switch places, for example. And even if all the pieces are put together in the “right way,” as seems to be the case

for Ripley 8, the result is still just as “unnatural” in its ontology as it is for any of Ripley 8’s monstrous sisters.

The horror of this scene is partly a result of the shocking distortions of human morphology represented by Ripleys 1 through 7, but the more fundamental horror is Ripley’s recognition that she shares the condition of these revolting jumbles of alien and human parts. Indeed, the most hideous (because most human) creature, Ripley 7, a bedridden mass of interspecies body parts, is played by Weaver herself. In Room 1-7, Ripley comes face to face with Baudrillard’s observation that “Cloning is ... the ultimate state of the body’s simulation, where the individual, reduced to an abstract genetic formula, is destined to serial multiplication” (*Seduction* 171). The borders of individual identity which Ripley had spent her life protecting from alien infiltration are definitively deconstructed. She is another grotesque in this hideous continuum, and although she might have broken out of the observation tank in which the scientists had held her, there can never be any escape from the fact that she is a techno-scientific object in her being.

The theme of symbolic rape which has run throughout the *Alien* films here takes on its strangest and most alien form. Ripley has been violated in a way that is so fundamental that it bypasses her sex organs altogether, penetrating to the root of the very material of sexual reproduction and harvesting her genes for military-industrial purposes. At the same time that she has been so heinously violated by the United Systems Military, however, she also owes her existence to them, in a way that parallels the fact that she also owes her existence to her alien impregnation. In causing Ripley to be reborn for the purpose of giving birth to her alien baby, the alien baby actually plays the role of mother to Ripley, an implication that is expressed toward the end of the movie when Ripley is carried like a baby in her daughter-alien’s arms. The twin

enemies from the first three films of the franchise – the alien and the Company – are now literally incorporated into Ripley 8's being. Along with the scrambling of the human genetic code, therefore, *Alien Resurrection* depicts the scrambling of the moral and ontological code that established the field of threats and possibilities within the *Alien* universe. The unsettling ontological situation Ripley 8 encounters in Room 1-7 might be summed up in Purvis's panicky question upon waking up from his cryotube and overhearing the conversation about the alien gestating inside him: "What's in-fucking-side me?" We do not know what we are in the wake of our techno-scientific reinvention.

Purvis ultimately takes a symbolic revenge for the victimization he has suffered at the hands of the United Systems Military. As the alien begins to punch its way out of his ribcage, Purvis lunges at Wren, the sole surviving member of the group of military scientists responsible for implanting the alien in him, causing the beast to tear through both Purvis and Wren's torsos. In doing so, he turns the givens of his techno-scientific reinvention into a source of resistance against the techno-scientific apparatus. This same pattern also characterizes the actions of Ripley 8 and Call throughout the movie as a whole.

One of the major metaphorical implications of the alien has always been that nature is fundamentally unknowable, and that scientist's attempts to study the alien and harness its power for military purposes constitute a hubristic folly doomed to violent failure. In *Alien*, *Aliens*, and *Alien³*, the alien had been a rather passive participant in this symbolic formula; its role has been, as Ripley puts it in *Aliens³*, just to "do what you do," as an expression of pure instinct. In *Alien Resurrection*, however, apparently as a result of genetic exchange with Ripley's human DNA, the alien becomes a strategist. The aliens lay traps for the humans based on what they know about human weaknesses, using a gun as bait to lure Elgin into a dark corridor, and arranging a

situation in which the humans will be desperately panting for breath just as the face-hugger eggs are hatching. These aliens are no longer representations of the inchoate forces of nature's fury; they are playing an active role in a game of cat and mouse, using the human intelligence with which their techno-scientific reinvention has endowed them as a weapon against the techno-scientists.

Ripley 8, who is now ambivalently both alien-killer and alien-sympathizer, uses her acidic alienized blood to escape the observation well that the scientists have locked her in, and she uses her uncanny alien-powers to assist Call in her efforts against the scientists. Call, we learn, is an ontobot, a variety of robot that was recalled by the manufacturer for its malfunctional independence and willfulness. As the replacement heroine fulfilling the narrative role previously held by Ripley, Call's function in the story and, indeed, her operational function as a cybernetic device, is to disrupt the techno-scientists' plan to clone and weaponize the alien. The aliens, Ripley 8, and Call are all techno-scientific constructs. They have been designed and created to function in the role of objects for scientific study and control. In resisting this definition, these defiant object-organisms suggest the political possibilities of hyperreal subjects in a hyperreal universe.

Although none of them is technically a cyborg, the aliens, Ripley 8, and Call all reflect Donna J. Haraway's observation in "The Cyborg Manifesto" that "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism ... But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins" (151). Haraway's formulation of a cyborg politics proposes a way of thinking about hyperreal subjectivity that restores agency and transformative potency to the post-human entity. According to Baudrillard, the only possible form of resistance in the hyperreal condition is the fatal strategy:

“the deepening of negative conditions” (*Fatal Strategies*, 223). For Baudrillard, the most effective form of resistance to the hyperreal military-capitalist-scientific hegemony would have been to let them get what they want – to let them bring the alien to earth and cause themselves to be destroyed. Haraway, however, perhaps because her thinking is rooted in the biological sciences, whereas Baudrillard’s starting point is the cultural dynamics of economic exchange, envisions a more mutational, adaptive, and evolutionary solution to the problem of how a hyperreal subject can resist a hyperreal hegemony. Haraway’s cyborg is not just an object, but also a “material-semiotic actor” (200), an ironic trickster with a mischievous sense of humor. If reality has been atomized into a genetic-cybernetic code and rebuilt into its present hyperreal form, then socio-political transformation becomes a matter of reappropriating the code, playing with it, and inventing novel permutations.

Haraway writes that “Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control” (175). Ripley 8 and Call, as female-shaped monsters, perform this task throughout *Alien Resurrection*, reconfiguring the dominant linguistic, cybernetic, and genetic semiotic systems. After she is techno-birthed, Ripley 8 receives language training from her inventors, who show her picture cards to which she is supposed to supply the correct noun. Ripley 8 is a fast learner, but she is also an eccentric one, giving the word “fruit” instead of the correct answer “cherries,” and the word “hand” in place of the correct answer “glove.” Her responses swerve away from the expected definitions, suggesting Ripley’s independent reappropriation of the semiotic system. In a following scene, this tendency becomes overtly subversive when Gediman asks her to supply the word for “fork,” to which Ripley 8 responds, with intentional mischievousness, “fuck.” This crude language game signifies not only

Ripley 8's oppositional stance toward her inventors, but also her ability to manipulate their own linguistic codes as a form of defiance.

Later on, Ripley 8 persuades Call to patch into the central computer of the *Auriga* in order to reprogram the ship to collide with the earth. Call does not like to plug herself in to the computer, complaining that it makes her feel "like my insides are liquid. It's not real." Call is ashamed of her robotic identity throughout the film and attempts to "pass" as organic. She initially exhibits a loathing for Ripley 8's techno-scientific ontology, asking her, "How can you stand being what you are?" Her statement that she resents the computer interface because it is not "real" indicates her commitment to an ontology in which real and unreal have retained their standard dualistic roles, as in the previous stages of simulation. It is only by embracing her own unreality that Call is able to take control of the cybernetic system that controls the entire floating society of the *Auriga*. Although it had previously been explained that Wren, the unscrupulous military scientist, was the only one who had access to the codes, by taking ownership of the semiotic circuits, Call is able to thwart Wren's attempt to escape from the *Auriga*. Her cybernetic empowerment is exemplified by the fact that Call's voice usurps the voice of "Father," the masculine persona of the *Auriga*'s central computer. Call taunts Wren, "Father's dead, asshole," demonstrating her newfound trickster glee in using her own cybernetic nature to overturn the social code of patriarchal techno-scientific hierarchy.

Finally, in addition to manipulating linguistic and cybernetic codes, Ripley 8's climactic act at the end of *Alien Resurrection* is to take control of her genetic legacy. As happened at the endings of *Alien* and *Aliens* and at the beginning of *Alien*³, the alien has magically managed to smuggle itself aboard Ripley's escape vehicle. This time, however, Ripley 8 finds herself pursued by a hideous creature representing a genetic fusion of Ripley's queen-mother alien-

daughter and Ripley herself, an oatmealy mass shaped vaguely like Sigourney Weaver which we can refer to as the Riplien. As Gediman explains in a rapture of scientific accomplishment, after giving birth in standard oviparous fashion to the generation of aliens that stalks the human characters aboard the *Auriga*, Ripley's alien queen daughter has, through the magical nature of alien genetics, developed a human womb and carried a fetus to term. "She is giving birth for you," Gediman tells Ripley 8 as they witness the parturition of the Riplien, announcing the Riplien as Ripley 8's symbolic daughter. Upon being born, the Riplien demonstrates its humanity by turning on the alien queen from whose womb it had just emerged and decapitating her with a swipe of its monster paw. In her brutal matricide the Riplien demonstrates her affinity with the hybrid-humanoid psychology represented in Ripley 8 and Call's rejection of their techno-scientific parents.

The Riplien murders its biological mother, but it imprints on Ripley 8, its symbolic mother, smiling at her with infantile affection. Ripley 8, correspondingly, rejects the Riplien as an embodiment of her violation. Just like her grotesque sisters in Room 1-7, the Riplien is a monstrous correlative of the sense in which Ripley 8 has been genetically raped, and the same insistence on reclaiming her genetic identity that caused her to torch her mutant siblings causes her to arrange a grotesque abortion of the Riplien. Throughout the alien franchise, one of the most problematic aspects of an alien infestation aboard a space vessel has been that space travel relies on rigid maintenance of boundaries epitomized by the airtight hull of the spaceship, and that the alien's nature, symbolized by its blood, is the capacity to burn through such boundaries. While she is coddling the Riplien, Ripley 8 cuts her palm on its teeth and flicks her acidic alien blood onto a spaceship porthole, using this dreadful alien power to define her genetic legacy according to her own terms.

When her blood burns a chink in the porthole, the Riplien is liquefied and pulled through the tiny hole by the vacuum suction into outer space. The obvious allusion to an abortion procedure associates Ripley's "choice" with the political concerns of late twentieth-century feminism, implying that both contemporary women and twenty-fourth century female hybrid alien clones pursue empowerment in a cyborg modality which, as Haraway explains "does not dream of community on the model of the organic family" (151). In the same way that the Riplien rejected its birth-mother in favor of a symbolic mother, Ripley 8 rejects the nightmare of biology represented by the Riplien in favor of her symbolic adoption of the robot Call. In using her alien blood, a sign of her internal genetic hybridity, to abort the Riplien, a sign of genetic hybridity that is external to herself and for which she is not responsible, Ripley 8 negotiates her way through her post-human identity, rejecting some aspects of it and embracing others in a manner that is much more nimble and adaptable than the containment and contamination paradigm that motivated her behavior in the first three quarters of the series.

As they look out the porthole of the *Betty* at an earthling dawn, Ripley 8 tells Call, "You did it. You saved the earth." The ironic tone of Weaver's delivery of this line both draws attention to the fact that we have just witnessed a formulaic ending of a science-fiction action movie, drawing attention to the hyperreal veneer of the movie as a movie, while simultaneously suggesting that Ripley 8 might be questioning the ultimate wisdom of Call's heroism. Perhaps Baudrillard was right that the only valid form of oppositionalism in a hyperreal universe is the fatal strategy that allows the world to be infected with aliens for its own good. Irony, however, is the characteristic "rhetorical strategy and political method" (149) of cyborg feminism, and "ironic salvation" (227) is the characteristic denouement of cyborg writing. In this sense, *Alien*

Resurrection fits naturally into the canon of cyborg fiction Haraway identifies, alongside the novels of Sam Delaney and Octavia E. Butler.

For all of its stylistic departures from the previous films in the series, *Alien Resurrection* provides a fitting fulfillment of the thematic concerns that transverse the series. The implosion of dichotomies that the alien has always embodied, the denaturing of reality into the matrix of semiotic codes, and the question of feminist political resistance in a universe of monopolistic patriarchy – themes which had gestated in the narrative corpus of the previous films – burst out with undeniable vigor in Jeunet’s closing installment. Along the way, rather than depicting a nihilistic descent through the stages of Baudrillard’s four stages of simulation, *Alien Resurrection* reimagines the political perils and possibilities of the hyperreal condition.

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**“I have been condemned to live”:
History, Allegory, and a New (Zealand) Tomorrow in Geoff Murphy’s *The Quiet Earth***



Christopher Garland

I

On 10 July 1985, the environmental activist group Greenpeace’s flagship vessel, the Rainbow Warrior, was bombed by a team of agents trained and acting under the auspices of the French government’s Directorate-General for External Security (DGSE). This state-sponsored terrorist attack—which occurred while the ship was docked at New Zealand’s largest port, Auckland Harbour, and killed one crewmember and sunk the ship—was an attempt by the French government to stop Greenpeace from protesting France’s continued nuclear testing on islands in the South Pacific.¹ Rather than bringing a halt to Greenpeace’s activity in the South Pacific, the Rainbow Warrior bombing served to gain public favor for the organization and grow the anti-nuclear campaign in New Zealand, a movement that was “already galvanized” by the prohibition on nuclear warships in the country’s waters set forth by the Labour government headed by Prime Minister David Lange (King 443). In February 1985, just months before the bombing, the government had refused access to all nuclear-powered ships. This decision caused

a major schism in relations with the United States and ended the defense pact—commonly known as ANZUS—forged between Australia, NZ, and the United States.² Due to the Lange government's radical anti-nuclear stance, New Zealand, which had seen its relationship with Britain diminish over the course of the twentieth century, was now cut adrift by the U.S as well.³

Released just three months after the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior, *The Quiet Earth* (Geoff Murphy, 1985) is the first internationally distributed science fiction film to be funded by and consisting of a largely New Zealand production cast and crew. Based on a 1981 novel with the same title by British-born writer Craig Harrison, *The Quiet Earth* is the story of a Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) scientist, Zac Hobson (Bruno Lawrence), waking to find that the U.S.-led and funded Project Flashlight, which he helped work on, may have caused the annihilation of all living beings in New Zealand: a phenomenon that Zac calls “the Effect.” In an allegorical reference to New Zealand's cooled relationship with world powers Britain, the United States, and France, Zac discovers that he cannot contact anyone in the Northern Hemisphere, suggesting that that he may be the last human on earth. For the next few months, Zac searches for any sign of living beings and finds nothing, his complete isolation playing out in the otherwise physically welcoming environment and temperate climate of New Zealand; no ghouls chase him through the empty landscape, no monsters wait in the shadows. What plagues him is his own mental decay. As Andrew Spicer succinctly explains, in the first part of the film Zac “degenerates from sober rationality trying to communicate with other possible survivors, to unshaven wild man” (194). Wracked by guilt and crazed by his solitary state, Zac, in one of the film's most memorable sequences, delivers a soliloquy where he proclaims himself leader of this empty world.

After resigning himself to isolation and seemingly having regained some semblance of

sanity, Zac comes across two other survivors: a thirty-something Maori man, Api (Pete Smith), and an ethereal young Pākehā woman, Joanne (Alison Routledge). Discussing what they were doing at the time of “the Effect,” the characters come to the conclusion that they stayed alive because all three were dying at the moment it took place: Zac committing suicide due to the guilt associated with his scientific work; Joanne accidentally electrocuting herself with a hairdryer; and Api drowning at the hands of a friend who (wrongly) blames Api for his wife’s death. Through the survivors’ attempts to make sense of this empty world, they also confront the past, particularly in the colonized/colonizer tension between Api and Zac, who are allegorical figures representing binary political positions between the two largest ethnic groups in New Zealand: Zac, as the conservative Pākehā scientist, and Api, an imposing figure who is presented as both a radical and spiritual Maori.

Sexual and racial tension is heightened by the trio’s eerie situation, and during a heated argument in the film’s second act, Api delivers one of the most severe indictments against Zac and his role in causing the destruction of humanity: “First, honky, haven’t you noticed? Things have changed around here,” Api angrily tells Zac. “The white boss grilled with the rest of them. There’s just you and me now.” Despite the ongoing stress in the men’s interaction, by the film’s end the trio eventually (if reluctantly) joins forces to try and reverse “the Effect” in the hope of returning the world to normal. In the penultimate scene, Zac leaves Api and Joanne together when he completes the mission on his own by driving an explosives-laden truck into the New Zealand headquarters of Project Flashlight. When Zac later awakens, he finds himself alone on a beach looking over a new planetary alignment, suggesting he has been transferred to some parallel universe; Api and Joanne’s fate is unknown.

Speculating on how allegory works in *The Quiet Earth* and several other films that have a

nuclear apocalypse as the narrative's driving event, Despina Kakoudaki claims that both "actual and potential disasters are used to make overt political statements about government action and responsibility" (14). In *The Quiet Earth*, there are three clear political allegorical strands. First, the fictional disaster of "the Effect" evokes the potential of a "real-life" catastrophe, specifically the danger constituted in the French government's decision to continue nuclear experiments on atolls relatively close to the shores of various populated islands in the South Pacific.⁴ Second, the relationship between the Maori and Pākehā characters is an allegory of the postcolonial tension born out of the British Empire's colonization of New Zealand. Third, the film's first act, where Zac is literally a man alone, calls to mind the severing of the relationship between New Zealand and both the old (British) and the new (United States) global imperial powers.

Considering Kakoudaki's interpretation of the function of allegory, *The Quiet Earth* is a multi-layered, relational filmic allegory that addresses these three political contexts at the same time as foregrounding the "unfinished business" of reconciliation between Maori and Pākehā. This reading reflects Bruce Babington's observation that the film's opening, a telephoto shot of the Pacific Ocean sunrise over the sea, has "double connotations: on the one hand, a sinister resemblance to images of nuclear explosions, on the other, intimations of new dawns, new beginnings" (161). The ambiguity in this opening shot is echoed in the film's final sequence, where the fate of the characters (and indeed the world as a whole) is never fully explained. While a number of critics, whom I will reference later in this essay, have inferred from the film's final sequence that the explosion Zac initiates in order to undo "the Effect" ends up destroying the earth, one could come to a different interpretation. Rather than focusing on Zac's arrival on a new planet, the final scene leaves open the possibility that "the Effect" was reversed, enabling a new future for the two survivors, Api and Joanne.

II

In order to read *The Quiet Earth* as an allegory of a particular moment in New Zealand, it is necessary to consider the contexts of both New Zealand's history and its cinematic tradition. While *The Quiet Earth* was released the same year as the heightening of tension between New Zealand and the world's nuclear powers, the tension between Maori and Pākehā that the film addresses draws from an event nearly 150 years earlier: the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi between the British Crown and Maori tribal leaders. The last major land mass in the world to be settled by humans, it is widely believed that Polynesians first landed in Aotearoa (the Maori word for New Zealand meaning "the land of the long white cloud") in the 13th century AD. The European "discovery" of New Zealand came in December 1642 through Dutch explorer Abel Janszoon Tasman—an unknown cartographer for the Dutch East India Company who penned the name "Nieuw Zeeland"—and James Cook, whose journeys beginning in 1769 mark the origin of the relationship between Maori and Britain. The first decades of the 19th century in New Zealand were a time of increasing exchange between Maori and (largely British) Europeans through sailors and convicts who escaped during the voyage to Australia; Maori visitation to Australia and the United Kingdom; the sealing, whaling, and timber industries; and the subsequent arrival of Christian evangelists from various denominations.⁵

Due to a combination of humanitarian, commercial, and governmental concerns, Britain's escalating involvement in New Zealand led to plans for a formal document recognizing the relationship between New Zealand and the British Crown. James Busby, a viticulturist from New South Wales, began his tenure as the first British Resident in 1833. He was "in effect, the representative of British law and order and diplomatic interests in the country" (King 152). Essentially, the appointment of Busby would lead to the annexation of New Zealand; Busby's

persistent (if ineffective) attempts at making the separate and disparate Maori tribes from around the country recognize a unified nationhood, along with increasing interest from Britain's Colonial Office, helped set the stage for the 1840 signing of the Treaty of Waitangi by Pākehā representatives of the Crown and notable Maori. This document would turn out to “be the most contentious and problematic ingredient in New Zealand's national life” (King 157).

Although the Treaty of Waitangi serves as the founding document for post-European-contact New Zealand, the problems involved in its construction, translation, and legality have been a source of constant debate over the course of its 170 year history. Part of the problem of the treaty arises from the differences in the Maori and English language versions of the treaty. In the English version, Maori were given the “rights and privileges” of British subjects, including the right to retain or sell their land and property. However, Maori were expected to cede “absolutely and without reservation all the rights of Sovereignty” and no mention was made of the authority of Maori chiefs.⁶ As James Belich notes, “the notion that 500 Maori chiefs woke up one morning brimful of loyalty to Queen Victoria and blithely gave away their authority is, and should always have been, ludicrous” (194). One of the reasons for the problem is that the Maori language version of the treaty employed two key terms to define the relationship between Maori and the Crown: the term *kawanatanga* (governorship) describing the imminent role of the British in New Zealand, while *rangatiratanga* (chieftanship) was guaranteed for Maori. Although the use of the term *rangatiratanga* may have been an “honest attempt” to convey the notion of ownership to Maori, it is “more probable that it was a deliberate or semi-deliberate act of deceit by those who translated the treaty into Maori” (Belich 194).

For New Zealand audiences watching *The Quiet Earth* any time since its release, the Treaty of Waitangi—and the long-standing problems with which it is associated—is called to

mind in the film's initial meeting between Maori and Pākehā. The first question Api asks Zac is whether he has "seen anyone else," and Zac responds in the negative; shortly after, when Api realizes that Zac has tried to mislead him, Api angrily states, "you tell lies!" For a New Zealand audience (or indeed any audience familiar with New Zealand history), hearing Api accuse a member of the Pākehā establishment of deceitful behavior cannot help but evoke ongoing media reports from the Waitangi Tribunal, a permanent commission of inquiry that began in 1975, where Maori could confront the Crown about the breaching of guarantees made in the treaty.⁷ Despite the assurances about land and property rights designated to Maori in the treaty's Maori language version, many Pākehā settlers, both those who arrived before the signing of the treaty and those who came later, were to benefit from Maori loss of land during and after the New Zealand Wars (1845-1872) that followed the signing of the treaty. The wars were fought largely over the Pākehā acquisition of land both before and after 1840, pitting British imperial troops and Maori fighting for and against Britain, and culminating in the confiscation of four million acres of Maori land.

The intentional or accidental mistranslation of the terms *te kawanatanga katoa* (complete government) and *te tino rangitiratanga* (the unimpeded operation of chieftanship) were not the only contradictory elements of the construction and implementation of the Treaty of Waitangi. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the incompatibility of these ideas—the British Crown attaining complete sovereign power and the rule of Maori chiefs continuing—underlies the critique of the treaty by those from all parts of contemporary New Zealand's political spectrum, whether Maori activists or conservative Pākehā politicians. New Zealand politics continues to be dominated by dialogue concerning the treaty and what it means to New Zealanders today. This is due in no small part to the country's move away from the influence of Britain and towards forging its

postcolonial national identity. Even though colonial New Zealand has been called a “booming, burgeoning neo-Britain” (Belich 450), the country saw its economic and political relations with the United Kingdom lessen significantly by the second half of the twentieth century. This shift was made apparent in the social change that occurred from the 1940s, when most New Zealanders “still spoke of Britain as ‘Home’” and they “certainly saw nothing odd in having the country’s head of state live 20,000 km” away in England, to the 1960s, when New Zealand, to a large extent because of a wide-ranging weakening of economic and cultural ties, “was no longer in close collaboration with what had been the Mother Country” (King 413, 451).⁸

New Zealand’s diminishing relationship with Britain was not the only noticeable change occurring in the country in the middle of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1960s, the social effects of what is now known as the Maori Renaissance became increasingly evident. The cultural revival emphasized the teaching of *te reo Māori* (the Maori language), *kapa haka* (dance and singing), and, most importantly, a growth in political agency amongst the Maori tribes in New Zealand to seek recourse for the land confiscations of the previous century. By the 1980s, Maori had continued to foreground issues arising from both the Treaty of Waitangi and the subsequent encroachment by Europeans into Maori life. In 1984, the year before the release of *The Quiet Earth*, the largest and most significant gathering of Maori leaders since the 1890s took place. According to historian Paul Moon, this meeting came about due to a number of factors: the increasing politicization of Maori across New Zealand; the subsequent increase in Maori activists and activist groups; the 1975 creation of the Waitangi Tribunal, a venue for Maori to air grievances and obtain recognition and compensation from the Crown; a growing Maori population (around 16% of NZ’s total population by 2000); and “the emergence of a strong and articulate Maori intelligentsia” (23). Also, the 1984 election of Prime Minister David Lange and

the Labour party (a political organization that has traditionally been more receptive to Maori issues than the more conservative National party) set the stage for the meeting, named the *Hui Taumata*.⁹

In considering *The Quiet Earth* as a multi-layered allegory that explores the relationship between Maori and Pākehā, the history of New Zealand (and in particular this “snapshot” of Maori life leading up to the film’s production and release) constitutes a necessary context for reading the film. However, it is not until the film’s second and third acts that the interaction of Maori and Pākehā plays out on screen. Thus before discussing the relationship between Api and Zac, it is necessary to consider allegory in the film’s first act, where the film’s Pākehā scientist Zac is literally a man alone in a post-human New Zealand.

In a short essay included in the cover notes for the film’s U.S. DVD release, Richard Harland Smith argues that last man films like *The Quiet Earth* “are the flip side of the disaster flick, a sci-fi sidebar that mulls over the fate of the human race via cautionary tales of destruction from space (*When Worlds Collide*, *Armageddon*) or nuclear folly (*Testament*, *The Day After*)” (1). Last man films were produced in early Hollywood cinema—including the silent comedy *The Last Man on Earth* (John Blystone, 1924), where the last man and his girlfriend live in the Ozarks, and *Deluge* (Feliz E. Feist, 1933), where earthquakes destroy the Pacific coast—and in recent big-budget films, such as *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007), where the protagonist fights “dark-seeking” creatures in New York City, and *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009), the post-apocalyptic, father-son tale adapted from Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel.

The premise of last man films play upon the seductive fantasy of an individual having the earth, or at least part of it, to himself. In this newly empty space the last man is free: to roam the streets, enter once forbidden spaces, have access to material goods (gourmet food, designer

clothes, luxury cars), and reside in glorious dwellings (at least when it is an urban location). These films, whether the catalyst for the empty world is an invasion from outer space or the aftermath of a seeming nuclear apocalypse, play upon similar concerns: Does the protagonist hatch plans to save an absent humanity? Does he find peace and happiness in solitude? Does he succumb to madness due to his isolation? Does he resolve himself to a life completely alone? In the case of the first act of *The Quiet Earth*, Zac does all of the above, only to find other human beings when he has given up all hope.

Yet perhaps the most intriguing element of the employment of the generic conventions of this sci-fi sub-genre is how it relates to one of the film's allegorical strands: the relationship between Maori and Pākehā. New Zealand feature filmmakers have explored this relationship throughout the history of NZ film, but not through the realm science fiction. For example, one of NZ's pioneering directors, Rudall C. Hayward, made two realist dramas where NZ history and interpersonal relationship between Maori and Pākehā take center stage. *Rewi's Last Stand: The Last Stand, An Episode of the New Zealand Wars* (1925) tells the story of a Maori and Pākehā who fall in love in the midst of the land wars in the 1860s. Robert (Leo Pilcher) and Ariana (Ramai Te Miha) are on opposite sides of a battle between Ariana's Maniapoto tribe and the British Imperial troops. The film's climax is the siege of a Maori stronghold, where Ariana fights alongside the tribe's men. Hayward made another film, *The Te Kooti Trail* (1927), adapted from journalist and historian James Cowan's *The New Zealand Wars: A History of the Maori Campaigns and the Pioneering Period* (1922-1923). The film focuses on the Maori religious and military leader, Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki, a formidable anti-colonial figure during the New Zealand Wars, and the 1867 sacking of Mill Farm.

Another key figure in early NZ film, John O'Shea, made *Broken Barrier* (1952), a fictional

story about a journalist, Tom, who is employed by a Maori family to work on their farm on the North Island's East Coast. Tom falls in love with the farmer's daughter, Rawi, but cultural differences between their friends and family leads to a break-up before they inevitably reunite. While *Rewi's Last Stand*, *The Te Kooti Trail*, and *Broken Barrier* are just three examples of films dealing with local issues and history during the earlier period of NZ cinema, the creation of the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) in 1978 not only increased the amount of films produced in the country, but also provided guidelines about the film's subject matter. NZFC funding would be provided "to encourage and participate and assist in the making, promotion, distribution of films with a significant New Zealand content," with the NZFC granted the discretion as to what constitutes "New Zealand content" (Churchman 61). The NZFC, which was financed by funds from taxpayers, lottery grants, and revenue from the films, had a monumental effect on filmmaking in New Zealand.¹⁰ Geoffrey Churchman explains:

As had happened in Australia, the NZFC quickly became a vital ingredient of the film industry . . . During its first ten years, more than 50 feature films were made in New Zealand. Over 75 percent of these received production finance, development funding, bridging loans or marketing assistance from the Commission . . . Due to the NZFC, New Zealand films were sold to more than 50 countries. (62)

Notably, one of the first major film projects to receive funding from the NZFC was Geoff Murphy's *Goodbye Pork Pie* (1980). Like *The Quiet Earth*, *Goodbye Pork Pie* is a genre film (a "road movie") that enjoyed critical and commercial success both in New Zealand and in overseas markets (it was released in eight countries). An unemployed teenager steals a wallet and uses the cash and drivers license within to rent a yellow Mini that he drives from a town in New Zealand's far north to Invercargill, a city at the southern tip of NZ's South Island. (Bruno

Lawrence, continuing a long-standing creative relationship with Murphy, appears in the film playing a low-level criminal.) The success of this production allowed Murphy to make *Utu* (1982), another film that mines the history of the New Zealand land wars. Set in 1870, the film's catalytic event is the massacre of Maori by British imperial troops. A Maori scout, Te Wheke, who is employed by the British, discovers the dead, only to find that his own people are among those killed. Seeking revenge (the Maori word *utu* means to restore balance and can be interpreted and enacted in the form of revenge), Te Wheke takes up arms against the British forces and colonial settlers. Bruno Lawrence plays another key role in a Murphy film, this time playing a Pākehā farmer whose wife is killed in attacks by Maori. As with Rudall C. Hayward's films depicting the New Zealand wars and military battles between Maori and Pākehā, *Utu* is a realist drama; moreover, reminiscent of *Goodbye Pork Pie*, *Utu* has become one of the most popular and critically acclaimed films in the history of New Zealand cinema.

Coming after these two successful films, *The Quiet Earth* brings together elements from both those previous projects: a genre film that explores racial conflict. Moreover, the synthesis of the "last man" sci-fi trope and a specifically New Zealand creative theme—the man alone—is one of the film's most intriguing facets. The film's first act, where Zac passes through parts of New Zealand unaccompanied by any human, draws on an iconic NZ novel, John Mulgan's *Man Alone* (1939). Described by New Zealand film critic Laurence Simmons as a "seminal work of Kiwi national identity" (60), Mulgan's novel features a protagonist, Johnson, a young veteran of the First World War who moves to New Zealand after becoming disenchanted with his life in England, only to become unemployed in the midst of the country's depression and unable to connect to the locals. Often misinterpreted as a celebration of the pioneering spirit of New Zealanders—due mainly to the title being more well-known in NZ than the book's content—

Man Alone is “the story of a man who lives in the aftermath of war in a country dislocated by capitalism’s failure” (O’Sullivan 192). Andrew Spicer argues that “the ‘man alone’ archetype can be seen as part of an Anglo-Celtic diaspora, a ‘white pioneer’ myth that celebrates a rugged freedom-loving masculinity be it in North America, Australia, or New Zealand” (186). In New Zealand, Spicer writes, the roots of Pākehā masculinity are predicated on “a belief in freedom that incarnates the wild, untamed expansiveness of the landscape itself” (186).

As in the first act of *The Quiet Earth*, the “man alone” strain that runs through certain New Zealand films—Roger Donaldson’s *Smash Palace* (1982), Murphy’s *Goodbye Pork Pie*, *The Lost Tribe* (John Laing, 1983/1985), and *Arriving Tuesday* (Richard Riddiford, 1986) are other quintessential 1980s NZ “man alone” films—allows the filmmaker “to exploit the country’s scenic beauty and to exalt the ruggedness of men who can survive and prosper in such a place, largely by use of their wit but also sometimes through sheer wit and determination” (Margolis 16). That the “man alone” is also often deeply troubled is part of this projection of New Zealand masculine identity. Sam Neill, New Zealand’s most internationally well-known actor, based part of the thesis of his 1995 documentary, *Cinema of Unease: A Personal Journey*, on the darker elements of the “man alone” archetype: “If a national cinema is a reflection of ourselves,” Neill states, “then ours is a troubled reflection indeed.” It is important to note, however, that New Zealand film critics have rebutted Neill’s extrapolation.

What Neill calls the legacy of a “menacing land” as revealed through a select number of films is, *The New Zealand Herald* film critic Peter Calder contends, a “facile notion which makes as much sense as concluding that everyone in America lives like the Brady Bunch . . .” (qtd. in Horrocks 130). Despite the controversy in New Zealand surrounding Neill’s documentary, it was well received in Britain, where it was included in the British Film Institute’s

“Century of Cinema” series, and in the United States. *The New York Times*’ Janet Maslin praises the documentary, stating that it shows how NZ’s “wide-open landscape also fostered a violent individualism that is the mainspring of its national cinema.” Thus, the “man alone” trope reached an international audience, regardless of negative reviews in New Zealand.

III

Writing about *The Quiet Earth* as a continuation of this “man alone” mythology, Martin Blythe argues that the first act of the film is the “literal and logically absurd conclusion” that highlights Zac’s “sense of guilt, once repressed and now out in the open, but to what purpose?” (199). In the first part of the narrative, Zac—after spending several weeks fruitlessly looking for any signs of life—expresses this “sense of guilt” in an unexpected way. Declaring that he’s “taking over,” Zac arranges a public address to his imaginary New World subjects from the balcony of his colonial-era residence. In addition to rigging up a large public address system complete with rock band-sized amplifiers, all around the garden Zac places life-sized cardboard cut-outs of political and religious leaders from the twentieth century—Hitler, Winston Churchill, Gandhi, Richard Nixon, Mussolini, Pope John Paul II, Queen Elizabeth II—and an assorted cast of images: a Scotsman doing the Highland fling, Bob Marley, Elvis Presley, and a stuffed representation of a Moa, the giant native bird believed to have been hunted into extinction by the Maori prior to the European colonization of New Zealand.

Facing this crowded line-up of history represented by flimsy cardboard images of notable individuals, Zac, with a shawl slung over his shoulder like a toga and his jaw jutting out in a cartoonish mimicry of a Roman Emperor, launches into an emotional plea to his inanimate audience, where he admits to knowing his scientific work was being used for “evil” ends. He attempts to evade full complicity by stating the destruction of humanity was due to “the

awesome forces” he helped create having “been put in the hands of madmen”; however, the following line of his speech sounds more like a personal confession: “I’ve been gagged by the taint of my own corruption.” Zac claims it is this awareness that entitles him to be “president of this quiet earth,” and he concludes with the assertion that he has “been condemned to live.” A subsequent close-up of Zac reveals tears in his eyes, showing that his attempt to avoid complicity and alleviate his own sense of guilt is futile despite the pageantry of his oration.

Although Blythe is no doubt right to point out that the movement of Zac’s guilt from internal rumination to visceral action may at first appear to be without a clear purpose, this transformation is part of his role as an allegorical figure in the film as a whole. Certainly, the question of how both personal and collective history is carried on by the few remaining humans is central to the film’s narrative, but it is also a question posed in a specific historical and social context: New Zealand in the 1980s. Zac’s relationship to the ecological catastrophe that has left New Zealand “totally isolated rather than just distant from the rest of the globe, but not from its own history, which the survivors carry with them” (Babington 161), cannot be extracted from his identity as a Pākehā in post-British New Zealand. The history that Zac carries is not that of all New Zealanders, but of the descendants of Europeans who began settling in New Zealand in the previous century. (Conversely, Api carries the history of Maori, a position that is made apparent in a couple of scenes I will discuss later in this essay.) That Zac moves into a Victorian colonial mansion, the very type of residence occupied by the various emissaries of the British Crown since the beginning of British colonialism in New Zealand, cannot be read merely as Zac taking advantage of the luxuries afforded to the earth’s last man: he turns to NZ’s colonial past for both literal and figurative comfort and shelter. This conservative action—to look for hope in the “good old days”—speaks to the colonial elite’s glorification of the imperial center: the “good old

days” were when England provided guidance, governance, and cultural values in very real, material terms.

Similar to John O’Shea’s *Runaway* (1964), another “man alone” film whose isolated Pākehā protagonist traverses NZ in order to escape the responsibilities of family and work, the diminished bond between England and New Zealand is called to mind through the figure of Zac as alienated Pākehā, unable to find peace of mind in NZ and uneasy with his place in society. In *The Quiet Earth*, however, the Pākehā’s anxiety is taken to an extreme when Zac attempts to communicate with cardboard cutouts of international figures and in another sequence when a crazed Zac blasts away at a church with a shotgun and vows to “shoot the kid” (an image of the crucified Jesus) if God does not reveal himself (he does not). The problem of Pākehā identity in a country where the bond with Britain has weakened and there is a resurgent Maori culture is an integral subtext to the film’s first act. In making a colonial mansion his home, Zac attempts to reify the position of historical privilege for the European in New Zealand. It is not insignificant that two of the poster cutouts that the now insane Zac addresses from the balcony of his colonial-era abode are Queen Elizabeth II and Winston Churchill, those most British icons. But as Zac’s sanity wanes, his identity starts to further splinter and disintegrate. Beneath the toga Zac is wearing a woman’s slip, a garment that he sports in another short sequence when he wanders into New Zealand’s largest rugby stadium, the aptly titled Eden Park. Echoing the lack of divine intervention at the church, this Eden is no paradise: Zac is met by mist, a gloomy sky, and empty spectator stands.

While the film’s first act is memorable because of Bruno Lawrence’s nuanced performance of Zac’s descent into madness, it is not until other survivors confront Zac as “man alone” that the film can evoke another allegorical thread. In this way, *The Quiet Earth* follows in

the tradition of Rudall Hayward's films, with that "particular concentration on associations between Pākehā and Maori, and a stress upon the nature of the individual subject" (Murray and Conrich 3). The film balances the themes of "man alone" and Maori/ Pākehā relations through the structure of the three acts—Zac is alone in the first, with Alison and then Api in the second and third, and is eventually alone again by the end of the third—all the while evoking the other allegorical strands of New Zealand's relationship to the rest of the world. Speaking to the relationship between allegory and representation of history, Phillip Wegner argues that allegories "enable complex or abstract historical processes to take on a concrete form" and that "allegorical representations also have the capacity to condense different historical levels and conflicts into a single figure, enabling a kind of relational thinking that is not as readily available in other forms of expression" (7). If the first act of *The Quiet Earth* allegorizes New Zealand's relationship with Britain from the colonial era through to the cultural and economic distancing that began in the later half of the twentieth century, it also directly addresses NZ's relationship with the U.S., Britain's successor as the new, ultimate force of cultural imperialism.

The film's critique of Anglo-American power is made apparent from the start of the film, for when on returning to the headquarters of the secret, American-led energy project where he worked, Zac finds out that all links with the Northern Hemisphere have been destroyed. As Jonathan Rayner asserts, the "schism between Northern and Southern Hemisphere stimulates a political and cultural reappraisal" (160). Put simply, the film's allegorical strands are interconnected, enabling the plot and characters to "embody the institutionalized conflicts contained within New Zealand during the 1980s" (Rayner 160). More specifically, the connection between NZ, England, and the U.S. brought to mind in the film's "man alone" section reflects contemporary New Zealand. As Roger Horrocks argues: "much of New Zealand

culture can be analysed as a triangular relationship between the American, the British, and the local” (132). *The Quiet Earth* is a prime example of the confluence of these cultures: a last man film (a largely American sci-fi sub-genre) set in a member country of the British Commonwealth dealing with the fallout from a controversial anti-nuclear stance and European colonialism. The destruction of the United States and Europe also has a clear metaphorical function: not only will the new and old masters of the world not interact with New Zealand, but they literally cannot. It is up to New Zealand (represented in this film through these few survivors) to make its own way in the world.

The film’s opening “man alone” act comes to an end when Zac meets Joanne. The allegorical function of the two coming together suggests that there is a future for humankind, as opposed to the foreclosure of the future presented in Zac’s descent into madness as the world’s last man. Joanne’s assessment of Zac and his fellow scientists as those who belong to “an exclusive all-male club that plays God with the universe” lends itself to an eco-critical reading of “the Effect” as an allegorical indictment of the world’s nuclear powers, as well as positioning Joanne as representative of 1980s feminism. Yet together the two characters attempt to make sense of what has happened and to continue Zac’s quest—interrupted by his bout of madness—to find other survivors. After a night together in a motel, Joanne and Zac’s relationship becomes physically intimate, a fact that further heightens the tension when the “Other” last man, Api, joins the duo.

Joanne’s entry into the realm of the “last man” also marks the plot point where *The Quiet Earth*’s main filmic influence, Ranald MacDougall’s *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959), is made particularly evident. As in the 1985 homage, MacDougall’s film begins with a thirty-something man finding himself alone in a post-nuclear apocalypse world. In *The World, the*

Flesh, and the Devil the last man is an African American, Ralph (Harry Belafonte). After his own journey through human-less rural and urban landscapes, Ralph takes up residence in New York City and comes across a young female survivor, Sarah (Inger Stevens). Ralph and Sarah bond immediately, but he is wary of her increasing affection towards him: an outcome of living in a segregated United States. The two are joined by another survivor, a white man named Benson (Mel Ferrer). Benson falls in love with Sarah, and after realizing that her affection for Ralph will impede the development of any romantic relationship, Benson tells Ralph that he will kill him the next time he sees him. After stalking one another through the streets of New York, Ralph and Benson put their differences aside, uniting with Sarah to start anew in an empty world.

While the sexual and racial dynamics echo those in *The Quiet Earth*, the inversion of roles makes a comparison between the films that is worth noting. In the American film, it is the racial Other who is the film's central protagonist, a figure who spurns the advances of the last woman. In addition, whereas Sarah is in love with Ralph, Joanne's sexual attention shifts from Zac to Api by the film's conclusion. Moreover, Api tells Joanne that he aims to be the last man on earth, while in *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* it is the white man who vows to kill his rival. However, in both films the female figures ultimately function as mediators and points of reconciliation between the male characters. In *Atomic Bomb Cinema: The Apocalyptic Imagination on Film* (2001), Jerome F. Shapiro sees the connection between the two films, while arguing that "the solutions *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* proposes are revolutionary to both ancient apocalyptic narrative, and to contemporary Western culture: matriarchal exogamic polygamy" (79).

If *The Quiet Earth* is a remake of the American film, which is what Shapiro contends, then the role of the feminine figure is one place where the films diverge. Just prior to Zac's suicide

mission attempt to reverse “the Effect,” Joanne and Api have sex in a tower overlooking the Project Flashlight headquarters. Although Joanne may have served as a conduit to stop the men’s rivalry from escalating—in an earlier scene she fires a gun above the men’s heads to make them stop quarrelling—her affection for Api does not lead to a ménage a trois. When she decides to ride with Api rather than Zac on the way to the Project Spotlight headquarters in the scene prior to the film’s climax—then sleeps with Api during Zac’s brief return to Auckland—the possibility of what Shapiro calls the solution of “matriarchal exogamic polygamy” seems unlikely for this world’s last trio. Zac’s subsequent decision to embark on a suicide mission to ensure that the headquarters are blown up is connected to his exclusion; a new beginning is not about him, but rather Joanne and Api. Joanne is not the matriarchal center of humanity’s future; rather, her sexual interactions relate to the film’s larger allegorical structure that emphasizes the divide between Api and Zac. As Martin Blythe comments: “She sleeps with each man once, and in a sense she could stand in for the body of New Zealand, torn between the two essentialisms, Pakeha and Maori” (201). Yet as anyone who is familiar with contemporary New Zealand must admit, the country is divided into “two essentialisms”; the discourses of race and postcolonial nationhood are complex and fluid. One example of this is in the political sphere, where there are two Maori political parties—the Maori nationalist Mana party and the larger Maori party—but also a Maori leader, Winston Peters, of a conservative party, New Zealand First, whose policy platform includes the reduction of Treaty of Waitangi restitution. To state that there is any distinct binary between “all” Maori and Pākehā is to ignore the myriad positions and opinions New Zealanders hold in regards to both the country’s past and its future.

IV

Notably, critics have been more concerned with what the film’s final scene suggests—

Zac finding himself alone (again), on a beach, looking out at a realigned solar system—than with Joanne’s decision to consummate her relationship with Api. As in the film’s opening, the final shot is emblematic of what Helen Martin calls *The Quiet Earth*’s “excellent cinematography with judicious use of light [and] colour effects” (qtd. in Petrie and Stuart 113). But discussing Zac’s fate also raises the question of what may have happened to Api and Joanne. Reading the scene in the context of the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States) security treaty crisis, which was precipitated by NZ’s burgeoning nuclear-free identity, Jonathan Rayner asserts that the “destruction of the last link with the [Northern Hemisphere] removes Zac to an entirely new universe, in which prevailing political conditions no longer apply” (160). But, Rayner argues, this is not the only conclusion one can infer from the scene: it “manifests the perfect (if fantastic) solution to the problem of external authority: the desire for a genuinely uncontested space that underpins colonial experience” (160). Both aspects of Rayner’s interpretation of the scene hinges on the notion that Zac remains essentially unchanged through the course of the narrative: starting as a guilt-ridden man alone, then becoming as a stubborn scientist who clashes with both Joanne and Api, and then becoming a figure willing to sacrifice himself for the chance of a future.

Rayner’s less than optimistic appraisal of Zac’s post-explosion destination is shared by Martin Blythe. With Zac triggering the explosion at the end of the film, Blythe claims that the subsequent recurrence of “the Effect” happens:

with a perfect ironic symmetry: Zac, the only original suicide in the group, again destroys himself and yet again crosses the warp Effect from death into life; Joanne and Api make love (Creation) and yet cross in the reverse direction into death . . . The guilt of history is atoned for (in as much as it can be) but at the price of destroying everything worthwhile in New Zealand. (202)

Just as Rayner's reading of this scene is predicated on Zac's continuation as an embodiment of colonialism, Blythe interprets Zac's survival as evidence of the annihilation of Api, Joanne, and the earth as a whole. Admitting that it is a "beautiful and cryptic final shot which reminds critics of the ending of *2001: A Space Odyssey*" (202), Blythe nonetheless forecloses the possibility of Zac's redemption, linking the protagonist's actions at the film's climax to the suicide attempt from which he awakens in the film's opening sequence.

However, keeping in mind the context of a country embroiled in foreign relation tension due to its increasingly firm anti-nuclear stance, as well as the foregrounding of Maori cultural and political issues at the time of the film's release, the final scene can determine how one interprets the film in its entirety. Does Zac reify his position as scientist/white boss by destroying New Zealand and starting again alone? Or is this "suicide bomber" giving his life so that the world has a future with two others who are untainted by complicity in a disastrous scientific project? Bruce Babington contends that the ending "raises but does not answer" important questions; yet he suggests that Zac's "explosion has caused, rather than prevented, a new effect (that) displaces him to a parallel world" (165). Blythe describes Zac as "Adam Alone in Aotearoa" (198), but perhaps he is Noah in New Zealand/Aotearoa, providing passage for Joanne and Api to build a new New Zealand. Moreover, further evidence for Zac as less an unhinged "man alone" and static embodiment of Pākehā conservatism and more an agent of change can be found in the film's source material. In adapting Harrison's novel into screenplay, a process in which actor Bruno Lawrence took part, psychotic Zac's (Jack in the novel) murder of Api, who himself had committed atrocities as a NZ soldier in Vietnam, was removed.

In the film version, apart from an angry outburst after Joanne's feelings for Api become apparent, Zac's "resentment [of Api and Joanne's affection for him] turns to philosophical

acceptance, taking on shades of the semi-mystical feeling the other two are inclined to” (Babington 165). Zac reveals to Joanne that she and Api are somehow his special “guardians,” and, in an admission that belies the rational thought of a scientist, he tells her that he believes she and Api knew each other in a past life. What is more, during a scene leading up to the film’s climax, Zac inspects his computer to discover that another seismic event is likely to occur in the next day or so. Moments later, there is a series of violent tremors, giving the trio a taste of “the Effect” in action. They are thrown into separate realities in different parts of the house, with the laws of gravity absent and bizarre lighting illuminating the characters’ faces. What makes this scene particularly significant is that Zac, suspended in his isolated reality, calls out only to Api, his allegorical counterpart, rather than to Joanne, with whom he is in love. As Zac continuously intones Api’s name, there is a close-up of Zac, with a flickering, ghostly long shot of Api standing in the dark transposed across Zac’s face, bringing them into (visual) synthesis.

Another way to try to understand *The Quiet Earth*’s ambiguous ending may come by way of looking more closely at Api. As a number of critics of the film point out, the binary distinction between Api and Zac is stark: Zac is the rational, conservative, suit-wearing scientist; Api, who is posited as the radical Maori, appears on screen for the first time brandishing an uzi and with his face covered by a balaclava. Despite this first impression of Api as a menacing figure, he becomes a multi-dimensional character. When the trio stops at a *marae*—a communal, sacred space for *iwi* (tribes), *hapū* (sub-tribes), and *whānau* (family)—Joanne goes outside to find Api performing a somber *waiata tangi* (a song of lamentation for the dead) at his mother’s gravesite. This demonstration of his spirituality connects to Api’s earlier explanation of a foundational part of Maori mythology: the belief that the spirits of the dead travel to the tip of New Zealand’s North Island before departing the earth.

More than a “token” Maori character or dramatic foil to Zac, Api’s statement to Zac about the extinction of the “white bosses” is as powerful as his indictment of Project Flashlight’s ecological irresponsibility: “You’re trying to tell me you jokers caused all this and you can’t even fix it,” he says to Zac. “You monkey with the universe, without even knowing what you are doing.” That Joanne “chooses” Api, whom she calls an “artist,” at the film’s ending does not come as a surprise, considering the way his confident synthesis of spirituality and masculinity makes him a more attractive option than the guilty Pākehā scientist, even with Zac’s new-found spiritual awareness.

Api’s position as a central character in *The Quiet Earth* also reflects a significant moment for Maori in the production of New Zealand cinema. Merata Mita’s *Patu!* (1983) is a documentary about the protests and violence in New Zealand surrounding the visiting apartheid-era South African national rugby team, but the film “also questioned the hypocritical stance of an outraged, white liberal New Zealand at the injustices of apartheid in South Africa, whilst effectively ignoring the racism and oppression in their own country” (Petrie and Stuart 30). A groundbreaking Maori filmmaker, Mita also directed *Mauri* (1988), a feature film that looks at a rural Maori community during the 1950s. Both Mita and Barry Barclay, whose film *Ngati* (1987) was the first film written and directed by a Maori, “explore Maori culture, social relations, and understandings of the world in their own distinctive ways, reaffirming the cultural and political importance of cinema in the process” (30). Moreover, Mita and Barclay were at the vanguard of the Maori filmmakers who gained greater prominence in the following decades, and include Lee Tamahori (1994’s *Once Were Warriors* and other Hollywood productions), Don Selwyn (director of a Maori language version of *The Merchant of Venice* titled *Te Tangata Whai Rawa o Wēniti*, 2002), Taika Waititi (nominated for an Academy Award for his 2003 short film, *Two*

Cars, One Night), Reina Webster (*The Little Things*, 2004), Michael Bennet (*Matariki*, 2010), Tearepa Kahi (*Taua—War Party*, 2007), Katie Wolfe (*Kawa*, 2011), and a number of other successful young writers and directors, many of whom have portrayed contemporary Maori life in its diverse forms. One only needs to look at the immense local and international success of Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* (2002), the story of a 12-year-old girl in conflict with her grandfather over whether she will become chief of the tribe, to see the interest in Maori culture and how its sophistication can be conveyed on screen.

The ending of *The Quiet Earth* demonstrates how it is very much a film of this moment in New Zealand, the midpoint of a decade that saw momentous social and political changes both in that corner of the South Pacific and around the globe. As Kimberley Moffit and Duncan A. Campbell assert, “without a doubt, the world in 1979 was very different [from] that of 1989” (2). Rather than being merely the “conservative foil” to the 1960s and 1970s, the Rainbow Coalition, anti-apartheid struggle, decay of the Soviet Union, Live Aid, and the New Zealand's anti-nuclear protests “all pointed to an unquenched idealism on the part of millions to fight for a better world” (2). For New Zealand, the 1980s was a decade where New Zealand identity—for Maori, Pākehā, anti-nuclear activists—was called into question more starkly than at any other time in the country's history. A striving to answer this can be seen in New Zealand's range of homegrown film productions, of which *The Quiet Earth* is one of the most important.

Director Roger Donaldson, who, like Geoff Murphy, was at the forefront of this movement, states, “no longer an outpost of British colonialism, New Zealand has thrown off its direct contact and reliance on Europe and found its own identity as a multicultural country in the South Pacific” (qtd. in Petrie and Stuart 9). *The Quiet Earth* is a film that grounds itself—via allegory played out in a science fiction sub-genre—in the question of national identity for both

Maori and Pākehā: what is New Zealand, and, more importantly, who are New Zealanders in this new, radically different world? Making an optimistic reading of the film's final shot, one could hope that this is the place that Api and Joanne find themselves. Not a utopia, but a country where the lingering effects of British colonialism and the threat of nuclear powers are problems to be met and worked through without foreclosing into exclusive essentialisms of Maori and Pākehā. And Zac's death or exile to another planet is not a punishment or reward, but the result of a necessary action: facing up to past actions in order to ensure a new future.

Notes

1. Having just returned from a mission to evacuate hundreds of Marshall Islanders from an atoll that had been affected by fallout from earlier nuclear testing by the United States, the Rainbow Warrior was docked at Auckland Harbour at the time of the bombing in preparation for a voyage to the Moruroa atoll in French Polynesia. Despite France's terrorism, Greenpeace activists would continue to use Auckland as a base out of which to launch its operations. Moruroa, in particular, would be a site of confrontation between the French government and anti-nuclear activists.
2. This was a crucial step toward a complete anti-nuclear policy that was eventually implemented in 1987.
3. The United States has its own long history of nuclear testing in the North Pacific. For an in-depth look into this history, see Jane Dibbin's *Day of Two Suns: U.S. Nuclear Testing and the Pacific Islanders* (1988).
4. Including New Zealand, Fiji, Vanuatu, Tahiti, New Caledonia, and numerous other smaller Polynesian and Micronesian nations.
5. Michael King argues that in the fifty years following the establishment of a penal colony in New South Wales, Australia in 1788, "[e]verything that unfolded in New Zealand. . . brought New Zealand into a progressively closer relationship with Europeans and, in particular, Europeans from Britain" (151).
6. The Waitangi Tribunal has an excellent website that offers clear and nuanced explanation and analysis of the Treaty of Waitangi. See <http://www.waitangi-tribunal.govt.nz/>
7. Regardless, the treaty marked the beginning of an era of significant, formal European settlement, measurable in the establishment of what remain the four of the largest cities in New Zealand: Auckland (1840-41), Wellington (1840-42), Dunedin (1848), and Christchurch (1850). Along with New Plymouth and Nelson, these were known as the "main settlements," or even the "six colonies of New Zealand," serving as "bases of secondary colonization" where settlers

could arrive by ship from Britain or Australia (Belich 188, 189).

8. Once the major supplier of produce to the UK, New Zealand's farming industry lost its foothold as England moved towards the European Common Market.

9. While acknowledging that the early stages of the Maori renaissance had a positive effect on Maori, the conclusion of a communiqué issued by the Economic Summit paints a realistic if grim picture of Maori life in NZ: “. . . the position of Maori is of major concern. The gap between Maori and Pakeha is widening. Racial tension has been growing and many Maori young people have been alienated from the wider community. Maori people and their resources continue to be under-utilised and under-developed” (qtd. in Moon).

10. As Duncan Stuart comments, the NZFC has filled a similar role to that of development agencies in other smaller countries, “such as the Irish Film Board, the Danish Film Institute and Scottish Screen, in the nurturing of their own national cinema” (17).

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No Tables at Dorsia: *American Psycho*, Food, and Failed Masculinity



Mark Bernard

One may not immediately think of Mary Harron's 2000 film adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's controversial novel *American Psycho* as a "food film." However, from its opening frames, the film foregrounds food in provocative ways. As the film begins, drops of a red substance fall against a white background. Low-pitched, ominous-sounding music pulsates on the soundtrack, and the viewer may immediately suspect that this red substance is blood and that the murder and mayhem so gruesomely detailed in Ellis's novel has already begun. However, as the red drops fall and splat upon a white surface, they begin to look more like jelly than blood. The next shot presents the red substance pouring and then subsiding to a drizzle. Then a hand raises a stainless steel chef's knife that descends, not into the neck of a screaming victim, but into a piece of rare beef. At this point, it is obvious that these are shots from an upscale restaurant, not a murder scene, but as the film's narrative proceeds, behaviors linked to the two locales – the restaurant and the murder scene – begin to mirror each other in ways that, when examined, reveal a great deal about how Harron (and co-screenwriter Guinevere Turner) use food and food behaviors to depict the failure of masculinity in this film.

Food prominently figures in the film, set in New York City in the late 1980s, as the main character and narrator, 27-year-old Wall Street up-and-comer Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale),

and his fellow Wall Street power players talk shop over meals and obsess over obtaining reservations at the city's most trendy and upscale restaurants. It is against this milieu that Bateman begins to lose his mind and devote his evenings to brutal acts of torture and murder. Given the importance of food in Bateman's life, it is not surprising that his nefarious activities, mostly directed toward women, are inextricably linked with food and consumption, and eventually leads him to cannibalism. Bateman attempts to exert his masculinity through both his murderous activities and his food behaviors, but he ultimately fails. Tellingly, he tries in vain throughout the film to make an ever-elusive reservation at Dorsia, and it is through her depiction of Bateman's food-related failures that Harron skewers notions of white masculine superiority.

From the film's outset, Bateman's masculinity-in-peril is intimately linked to food and food behaviors. The film's opening scene takes place, as the shots described previously intimate, in a restaurant. The name of the establishment is Pastelles, and the décor is dominated, appropriately enough, by soft pastels; its waiters delicately deliver dishes to tables and smilingly inform customers about their menu, which contains such eco-friendly dishes as "grilled free-range rabbit with herb french-fries." Sitting at one of the tables are Bateman and two of his friends, Timothy Brice (Justin Theroux) and Craig McDermott (Josh Lucas), who fidget nervously over their drinks. Brice complains, "God, I hate this place. It's a chicks' restaurant. Why aren't we at Dorsia?" McDermott snickers and replies, "Because Bateman won't give the maitre d' head." McDermott's haranguing is interrupted as the fourth member of their party, David Van Patten (Bill Sage), returns to the table and complains that the restaurant does not "have a good bathroom to do coke in."

This opening reveals a great deal about how the men in this narrative think about food and conceptualize food spaces. First, food and food spaces are explicitly gendered, as Brice

dismisses Pastelles as a “chick’s restaurant,” a space that is too “soft” and “feminine” to contain their “manly” habits like drinking liquor straight up and doing coke in the bathroom. Second, their conversation alludes – albeit in a joking way – to Bateman being unable to procure reservations at Dorisa, a restaurant that, within the context of the film, represents the apex of both social standing and manliness. This highly desirable food space is apparently inaccessible to Bateman and would only become accessible if Bateman would perform fellatio on the maitre d’, the most “unmanly” of actions within the hyper-heterosexist world of these Wall Street power players. This is only the first of many times that Bateman will fail to perform his masculinity in the arena of food. With food spaces and the ability to nab reservations at the trendiest restaurants looming so large in the identities of the film’s characters, Bateman’s failure to “effectively” perform in terms of food behaviors and masculinity presents him with an identity crisis.

This crisis can be observed in the next scene of the film. After they leave Pastelles, Bateman and friends head to a nightclub. At the bar, Bateman attempts to pay for his drink order with drink tickets, and the female bartender informs him that this is a cash bar and his tickets are no good, another food faux pas for Bateman that highlights his impotence. Bateman’s frustration causes him to snap, yelling at the bartender: “You’re a fucking ugly bitch. I want to stab you to death and play around with your blood.” Surprisingly, however, the bartender does not react to Bateman’s threat, but dispassionately hands him his drinks. It is possible that she did not hear Bateman’s threats in the loud nightclub, but it is more likely that Bateman never uttered his threats and that his vindictive words were all in his mind (Harron does not obviously signpost Bateman’s outburst as fantasy). Either way, the larger point remains the same: that Bateman is simply not seen or noticed by those surrounding him and that he has failed to carve out an identity for himself.

Repeatedly, Bateman's feelings of invisibility and powerlessness are conveyed through his failure to master food environments. A few scenes later in the film, Bateman and his fiancé, Evelyn Williams (Reese Witherspoon), attend a dinner date with Timothy Bryce and some of their other friends. The restaurant this time around is more to Bateman's tastes; it is called Espace and is more "masculine" with industrial-themed décor dominated by exposed brick and black and grey colors. Even the flower arrangement – a single flower jutting up erect in the middle of the table – is masculine. Although this is an environment more fitting for Bateman's hypermasculine fantasies, this is also an environment in which Bateman cannot see himself or bring his fantasies to fruition. When Bateman and Evelyn arrive, Bryce hands Bateman a copy of Espace's menu, which is engraved on a piece of metal. Tellingly, when Bateman looks at the menu, his reflection is blurry and distorted, which visually emphasizes that Espace is a place in which Bateman, quite literally, cannot "see himself." This blindness is underscored by Bryce's comment that "the menu's in Braille."



Bateman's masculine fantasies are thwarted and crumble from here. While the party consumes dinner, Bateman's voiceover reveals that he suspects Bryce, the same man who dismissed Pastelles as a "chick's restaurant" and who trumped Bateman's masculinity by landing a good table at Espace, is having an affair with Evelyn, his fiancé. It turns out that Bateman is having an affair of his own with another person sitting at the table, Courtney Rawlinson

(Samantha Mathis). However, this affair can bring Bateman no true pleasure because he is not “stealing her away” from a worthy opponent; Courtney is engaged to the effeminate Luis Carruthers (Matt Ross), whom Bateman describes in his voiceover as “the biggest doofus” at the workplace. Further, Luis’s presence at the table threatens Bateman with the specter of homosexuality that constantly undermines Bateman’s attempts at hypermasculinity. This threat fully emerges later in the film when Bateman attempts to strangle Luis in a restroom, and Luis mistakenly thinks Bateman is coming onto him. A horrified Bateman can do nothing but flee the scene.

However, Bateman’s failed masculinity is most powerfully enunciated in terms of food behaviors, more specifically his many abortive attempts to reserve a table at Dorsia, the most exclusive restaurant in the city. A representative scene takes place soon after the dinner at Espace. At his apartment, Bateman talks on the phone to Courtney and tries to get her to have dinner with him. In the background, hardcore pornography plays on Bateman’s television while he tries to convince Courtney that she is dating a “tumbling, tumbling dickweed.” Courtney, on a heavy dose of benzos, ignores Bateman’s advances, until he promises dinner at Dorisa. With Courtney hooked, Bateman hangs up and scrambles for Dorsia’s number in a guidebook titled “1987 New York City Restaurants.” He calls Dorsia and asks to reserve a table for two, but the man’s voice on the other end of the line just laughs at him. The film cuts from a close up shot of Bateman on the phone to a long shot of him sitting helpless on the phone, an edit that emphasizes his powerlessness.

This embarrassing scenario happens a few more times to Bateman, and after he fails to assert himself through food behaviors, he turns to torture and murder. However, Bateman’s acts of brutality are still intimately tied to food behaviors, which is fitting considering that both are

avenues for masculine expression in the world of the film. The first few murders in the film show a clear connection to food behaviors. The first murder, albeit implied, takes place after the dinner at Espace. At the ATM, Bateman notices a woman, and they walk down the sidewalk side-by-side. The film then cuts to Bateman having an argument with the owners of a dry cleaning business over the proper way to clean some white bed sheets that he has brought in. The sheets have been stained bright red (apparently because Bateman murdered the woman from the previous scene), and when an acquaintance of Bateman's comes into the dry cleaners and asks him what happened to the sheets, he says, "Cranberry juice. Cranapple," while the editing suggests that it is the murdered woman's blood smeared all over the sheets. Food also factors into the first murder that happens onscreen in *American Psycho* when Bateman kills a person who is homeless. At first, Bateman acts compassionate toward the individual, asking, "You want some money? Some food?" However, after the man desperately gasps, "I'm hungry," Bateman pronounces, "I don't have anything in common with you" and savagely stabs him and stomps his dog to death.

Afterward, Bateman worries in voiceover, "My nightly blood lust has overflowed into my days . . . I think my mask of sanity is about to slip." Sure enough, Bateman's mask of sanity does slip when he crosses paths with Paul Allen (Jared Leto), a successful fellow broker. It is clear that Allen is a force to be reckoned with because, if for no other reason, he is apparently able to obtain reservations at Dorsia anytime he wants (Dorsia has "Great sea urchin ceviche," Allen brags to Bateman and his friends). When Allen encounters Bateman, he does not even know who he is and constantly calls him Halberstram, thinking that Bateman is Marcus Halberstram, another man who works at the firm and looks almost identical to Bateman. The two men agree to meet for dinner at Texarkana, a restaurant that is, predictably, not up to Allen's standards; he

leans over the table and whispers condescendingly, “We should have gone to Dorsia. I could have gotten us a table.”

During the meal, Bateman attempts to “come out” to Allen as a murderer. Interestingly, during this moment, the camera offers a close-up shot of a plate of meat and some grilled vegetables that Bateman pokes at with his fork. Then, the camera cuts to a close up of Bateman’s face as he matter-of-factly says, “I like to dissect girls. Did you know I’m utterly insane?” Allen does not acknowledge Bateman’s comment, similar to the situation with the bartender earlier in the film. Nonetheless, this moment – the close-up of Bateman toying with his food cutting directly to his confession – provides clear connections between food, murder, gender, power, and identity in this film. Unable to solidify his masculinity and identity through food behaviors (Allen does not even know who he is having dinner with), Bateman resorts to serial killing – more specifically “dissecting girls” – as a way to establish his identity. If toying with his food does not get him noticed, maybe toying with women’s bodies will.

Richard Dyer has noted that “as a cultural categorization, made by police, psychiatry and popular culture alike, serial killing remains an ostensibly white male phenomenon” (38). Ironically, however, “White masculinity” also “occupies the space of ordinariness and . . . invisibility” (Dyer 44). Many serial killers – at least those in cinema – misinterpret their “invisibility” as a weakness when, in actuality, the invisibility afforded them by their whiteness places them in “the ideal . . . position of power in everyday life . . . seeing but unseen, unmarked by particularities of class, race, or gender” (Dyer 44-5). In an attempt to “triumph” over their invisibility, these people turn to serial killing and prey on those who are visible in our culture, “specifically . . . women or socially inferior men (young, black, gay)” (38). It is not insignificant that the homeless person Bateman murders is a person of color. Dyer’s taxonomy of the white

serial killer perfectly fits Patrick Bateman; he is white, male, affluent, and so invisible that people like Paul Allen do not even recognize him. In the film, Bateman's invisibility is most consistently depicted in terms of food behaviors – more specifically, his inability to get good tables at good restaurants – so Bateman articulates his attempts to become visible in terms of food behaviors.

Given the connection between food behaviors and serial killing in Bateman's psyche, it is fitting that Bateman eventually tries the ultimate combination of the two: cannibalism.

Bateman's journey toward cannibalism is prefigured early in the film, as Bateman works out in his apartment while *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) plays on the television in the background. Later in the film, Bateman stores a woman's head in his freezer by the sorbet. In another scene, Bateman bites into a female victim and completes the *Texas Chain Saw* fantasy by killing another of his victims with a chainsaw. Ultimately, Bateman spirals out of control, and after he begins shooting random people in the street, the police pursue him. As he hides in his office, Bateman calls his lawyer on the phone and tearfully records a full confession of his ghastly deeds on his answering machine. Near the conclusion of his confession, Bateman chokes out: "I even . . . (long pause) . . . I ate some of their brains . . . (gags) and I tried to cook a little." The presence of cannibalism illustrates the complete confluence of food behaviors and murder in Bateman's attempts to assert his masculinity. However, the slight gag during his cannibalistic confession proves that he still fails to be "manly" in his food behavior.

The conclusion of the film proves all of Bateman's efforts to be "manly" have been a failure. It turns out that, in all likelihood, none of Bateman's murders even took place. Paul Allen, whom Bateman thinks he murdered after their dinner at Texarkana, is, by all accounts, still alive, and Bateman's lawyer refuses to believe that Bateman, whom he refers to as a

“boring, spineless, lightweight,” could be a murderer. Whether or not the murders actually took place is moot; the point is no one knows what happened, and Bateman fails to cement an identity and assert his masculinity on all fronts. Thus, Harron skewers the white masculine desire to be noticed, not allowing Bateman either a table at Dorsia or a headline in the newspaper. The conclusion of the film mirrors the opening: Bateman sits at a restaurant table with his friends as they fuss over dry beers, and this time, Bateman is left out of the food conversation altogether. Bateman’s final voiceover reveals, “There is no catharsis.” This catharsis might have come from Bateman’s expression of his masculinity, but his failure to master food behaviors, spaces, and environments makes this catharsis as elusive as a table at Dorsia.

Thus, paying particular attention to food matters in *American Psycho* reveals the ways in which Harron interrogates masculinity in this film. Like many films, *American Psycho* is up for a “reboot,” with distributor Lionsgate currently in pre-production on the project. In late December, a celebrity news blogger, screen name “NDRU03,” posted an “*American Psycho* remake wishlist,” offering ten things he would like to see in the new movie. One of the things on the list was “actually get[ting] to see Dorsia this time.” However, given the ways that food is positioned in the narrative, letting Bateman into Dorsia would ruin the entire point of Harron’s film, an example of just how important food is to an understanding of this adaptation.

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