

2011

## **\_Alien\_ Thoughts: Spectatorial Pleasure and Mind Reading in Ridley Scott's Horror Film**

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*Alien* Thoughts: Mind Reading and Spectatorial Pleasure  
in Ridley Scott's Horror Film

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Liberal Arts  
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
March 28, 2011

Keywords: Theory of Mind, Posthumanism, Cyborg, Evolutionary Psychology,  
Cognitive Studies

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## **Dedication**

I humbly dedicate this thesis to Dr. Kathryn Stasio who introduced me to Theory of Mind and Dr. Amy Rust who helped me use it. Thank you both for your insightful criticisms, sage counsel, enduring encouragement, and inspiring enthusiasm.

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## **Abstract**

Pleasure experienced in an unpleasant film genre, like horror, has prompted numerous discussions in film studies. Noted scholars like Carol J. Clover and Noël Carroll have rationalized spectatorial enjoyment of a genre that capitalizes on human anxieties and complicates cultural categories. Clover admits that horror initially satisfies sadistic tendencies in young male viewers but then pushes them to cross gender lines and identify with the strong female heroine who defeats the film's threat. Carroll provides a basic explanation, citing spectators' cognitive curiosity as the source of pleasure. Both scholars are right to consider emotional, psychological, and cognitive experiences felt by viewers, but the main objective of this thesis moves beyond one particular demographic and considers how spectatorial experiences can differ radically but still offer pleasure.

This work involves a methodology, Theory of Mind (ToM), that addresses the basic yet complex issues that inform spectatorial interactions with the horror film. Clover, Carroll, and others agree that viewers realize violations to cultural conventions occur in horror. Therefore, these anticipations, anxieties, curiosities, and tendencies of the spectator exist before and after a film rather than taking place within the two hours of watching its narrative. ToM is a cognitive ability that allows individuals to predict and make sense of others' behavior and underlying mental states and is a hardwired faculty that undergoes constant conditioning to ensure individuals can better interact with their environments, whether real or fictional. With horror, expectations are challenged, since spectators are forced to renegotiate cultural knowledge, as horror does not adhere to

convention. Horror exercises ToM intensely, but as this project proves, it is a pleasurable workout.

Ridley Scott's 1979 sci-fi horror film, *Alien*, is this work's case study, because it falls into the horror genre and challenges a few culturally-imposed binaries that are entangled in the film, including human/android and masculine/feminine. As this thesis shows, these entanglements demonstrate how ToM is both biological/cultural and is not categorized as a programmed mechanism in humans. With these enmeshed binaries, this study argues that *Alien* involves posthumanism, because it rejects traditional categories of identification and information and embodies fluidity. This works for ToM, since it is an ever-developing and conditioned process of observing and anticipating behavior. ToM is also posthuman, because information does not remain stagnant but is challenged or modified constantly in pleasurable ways. By witnessing the contradictions and complications of cultural categories through *Alien*'s characters, spectators can learn to observe the flux of identity outside the film's narrative, too. Because this learning process is in constant motion, this thesis points out how horror's stimulation and development of it are enjoyable.

**Chapter One:**  
**Forecasts in Space: An Introduction to Mind Reading**  
**in Ridley Scott's *Alien***

Without having to openly gaze upon its narrative, the horror film is generally viewed as a cinematic work that instigates unsettling emotions for its spectators. Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) is one such visual fiction that seems to confound scholarly discussion of its spectatorial pleasure. Set in an archetypal Terrible Place "where no one can hear you scream," *Alien* transgresses spectators' known environments and presents life forms and a space-place that are strange yet somehow familiar.<sup>1</sup> Typical of its horror roots, the narrative elements in *Alien* bear a semblance to spectators' realities but are all somehow grossly fantastic or irrational: an android passes for a human, an alien planet has the impression of a Southwestern desert, an alien creature has the characteristics of a human, not to mention the film's characters appear both gendered and genderless. This blurring of cultural categories is a common feat in horror films like *Alien*, but since it defies what spectators know and anticipate, one may pose the question, "What is pleasurable about this challenge for viewers of the horror film?" Cinematic pleasure lies in a specific cognitive ability, I respond, which horror most strongly tests and *Alien* fully demonstrates: the ability to mind read.

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<sup>1</sup> In her seminal text, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol J. Clover identifies the Terrible Place as a space that "may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in" (30).

To date, critical reception of *Alien* features a substantial amount of scholarship, which delves into feminist and Marxist areas of discussion. The film's representations of powerful female signifiers, issues of production or reproduction, and the greed of a capitalist corporation are among the pivotal themes analyzed. James H. Kavanagh, for example, notes the power of the "woman-signifier," since *Alien*'s Ellen Ripley becomes the knowledgeable and autonomous hero as well as the "strong centre of the film" (75). Others, like Barbara Creed, also explore the film's feminine signifiers by examining figures like the alien, yet these comments are fixated on femininity as a manifestation of anxieties of difference and castration rather than a presentation of Kavanagh's 'strong centre.' Vivian Sobchack also reveals how *Alien*'s narrative presents the absence of sex as a repressive force. All such discussions of the genre address *Alien* with concepts and methods of psychoanalysis that expertly politicize feminist theory. Accordingly, my argument acknowledges feminist concerns, like gender differences and identification, since they function as cultural information that influences spectators' experience with and interpretation of *Alien*. For example, taboos, anxieties, and identity constructs jointly create the context within which a horror film like *Alien* engages.

But striving to rationalize spectatorial enjoyment of such films, the evocation of obscured realities and blurred cultural categories in horror cinema has also been of interest to scholars. I start with Carol J. Clover's work from 1992 as the last great hallmark of scholarly discussion that repositions and rethinks pleasure in horror. Challenging traditional notions about enjoyment from the horror (mainly 'slasher') film, she suggests that more is at stake than the fulfillment of sadistic tendencies in male viewers. A vacillation of viewers' identification between the 'castrated' killer and



'phallicized' victim-hero is Clover's key observation, and her main concern follows the phenomenon of the slasher film's 'Final Girl' formula. The lure of the Final Girl plot, Clover explains, pivots on male viewers' need to identify with the film's heroine so as to partake of the abject terror culturally denied them as well as the pleasure of overcoming the threat. Clover's theory is undoubtedly significant, since it describes a cinematic interaction that both challenges and engages spectators rather than treating the horror film as a one-sided sadistic service. But Clover's ideas are largely exclusive to the male viewer. Since spectatorship is not restricted to one demographic or a single experience garnered from a film, it is valuable to consider a source of pleasure that encompasses *all* spectators and offers *multiple* consequences beyond identification. After all, horror films are viewed by both sexes who bear a range of cinematic preferences and cultural experiences. Theory of Mind, or what I call mind reading, cultivates spectatorial pleasure according to spectators' experiences before, during, and following the viewing of a film.

To suggest each person has the capacity to mind read is not to say everyone has telepathic superpowers. Rather, ToM is a cognitive faculty that helps humans interpret and anticipate behavior in others. Drawing on new observations and lasting memories, individuals build educated guesses about what others are thinking or how they are feeling and attribute various mental states to them. For example, in *Alien's* final scene, spectators may infer that Ellen Ripley slowly puts on her spacesuit while breathing heavily, because she nervously tries to avoid waking the alien creature and not, for example, because her body is fatigued. The process of ToM helps viewers make such interpretations while anticipating more actions like, "Will Ripley defeat the alien creature in this final encounter?" As this example shows, ToM produces pleasure through the interpretations

that individuals create. Spectatorial enjoyment is therefore not produced by a finite or universal assumption about Ripley's circumstance but in the stimulation and ongoing use of ToM, which improves upon this cognitive faculty and helps to eliminate possible wrong observations in the future.

When applied to cinema, ToM allows spectators to navigate fictional worlds and develop inferences about the characters in them. Film genres frequently follow certain tropes and plot formulas that make it easy for a spectator to determine, for instance, that the initially reluctant couple in a RomCom will unite by the movie's end. Clichés and gimmicks are exploited in the horror genre as well, but whether low-budget, art house, or semi-comedic, all horror capitalizes on plot twists and sudden shockers. More importantly, it complicates the cultural categories with which spectators interpret any film. These twists, shocks, and complications terminate a spectator's early assumptions about characters and situations as quickly as the story's first victim. *Alien* notably boasts figures that are not who they appear to be, mysterious foreign threats, and disruptions of gender conventions. Thus while all cinematic works engage spectators' cognitions, the horror genre especially prods viewers to interpret and reinterpret actions and behaviors. Spectators' ToM not only gets 'worked out' in the sense of exercising the cognitive faculty that is ToM, but what spectators know and believe is also stretched to the limit as they try to understand and anticipate what is happening in horror's strange or disturbing world.

In determining how spectators could find this unpleasant and challenging material pleasurable, I turn to Noël Carroll's work, which utilizes cognitive psychology to analyze what he calls the "paradox of horror" (10). Carroll chiefly claims that we are interested in

how “certain forces, once put in motion, will work themselves out. Pleasure derives from having our interest in the outcome of such questions satisfied” (179). Carroll’s comments certainly bring ToM to the fore, since people keep track of the behavior and actions of other individuals, whether fictional or not, and try to anticipate their intentions and outcomes. However, I argue that pleasure is in the *process* of working material out rather than just reaching various conclusions about it. By emphasizing ToM’s process, I avoid explanations that are rooted in finality and definitive solutions. After all, spectators can and do watch films they enjoy more than once, so even though questions about certain forces are already satisfied, as Carroll puts it, viewers still find pleasure in subsequent viewings of a film, because ToM is constantly engaged. Whether in cinema or reality, the conclusions individuals make are always kept under advisement as new information alters, challenges, or adds to inferences already made.

Hinged on cognitive studies, Byron Reeves’ and Clifford Nass’ book, *The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Places*, analyzes the way spectators approach various approach technologies such as film. Reeves and Nass conclude that when people respond to media, their “automatic response” is “to accept what seems to be real as in fact real” (8). Violent images, for instance, threaten individuals, as Reeves and Nass discover (8). This explains why many viewers may feel anxious after watching a fictional horror narrative, and I argue that, since ToM principally evolved to interpret non-verbal behavior, visual fictions can profit from this cognitive faculty greatly. Reeves and Nass help underscore my claim by revealing that humans expect media technologies to follow social and natural rules (5). In film, this expectation would certainly pertain to the on-screen characters, because they

simulate the social values of viewers' known world. Since ToM allows viewers to track characters' behavior, interests, and motives to anticipate possible actions, both the characters in and spectators of *Alien* carefully follow the behavior of the *Nostramo*'s crew to predict likely responses. Of course, *Alien* also departs from social and natural conventions. For this reason, I contend that it and other horror films engage spectators' ToM in particularly intense ways. I borrow this notion of intensity from Lisa Zunshine who similarly proposes in *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* that some fictional works, whether visual or written, "experiment with our ToM more intensely than others" (162). Zunshine also suggests that certain texts "find their readers, that is, the people who like their ToM teased in [a] particular manner" (162). Zunshine's claim is indeed true, but I contend that all manners of ToM workout are pleasurable, including those the horror film presents, since readers'/spectators' mind-reading ability is always stimulated and always modified; preferences of the reader/spectator can be created, adapted, and transformed continuously.

Without a doubt, *Alien* seeks to preserve a level of mystery surrounding its characters and plot, thus lending itself to the genre of intensity and teasing people's ToM. It presents uncanny material and violates, in quite critical ways, the ordered reality that spectators understand. *Alien* therefore renegotiates viewers' cultural knowledge. Going against the real world they understand, spectators must reconcile these violations and reeducate themselves in order to predict or properly categorize the unusual and/or uncomfortable information. Yet this renegotiating of cultural categories is pleasurable, since it exercises and enhances viewers' ToM and pushes them to be conscious of fluid information. Of equal importance, characters in *Alien* lay bare the functions of ToM and

demonstrate its value to viewers. For instance, anticipating another's next move is a matter of survival for the human crew aboard the *Nostramo* and an issue of strategy for both the alien creature and the cyborg, Ash.

Among countless instances of ToM play in *Alien*, the opening scene aptly illustrates the cognitive interplay that will recur throughout the narrative. In fact, the title sequence is an appetizer to the feast; it precedes all exposition but still prompts the spectator to employ preexisting information for predicting forthcoming events. To start, viewers begin observing the film aware they are watching a work entitled *Alien*. A single slash appears on the right-hand corner of the screen followed by a corresponding backslash on the left. Then, balancing these two typographical marks, a single upright line appears in the center. In a systematic pattern, more lines appear at various angles to form letters in anticipation of the end result: the word ALIEN spelled in white typeface. But before reaching this product, spectators can already determine what is happening. They soon realize the slash is the slanted arm of an 'A' or the line is the stem of an 'L.' The film exposes a little, and spectators use their contextual knowledge to calculate a meaning. Therefore, in the most simplistic and literal fashion, *Alien's* opening credits have already demonstrated pleasurable ToM interaction; its spectators predict what is being spelled out before the word is achieved. The anticipation, observation, and cultivation of knowledge from the film provide enjoyable stimulation of ToM. Though barely a scratch on the surface of this discussion, this brief and seemingly insignificant scene holds out a demonstration for the way in which spectator/film ToM relations work and how pleasure is released in the process. It also exhibits how *Alien*, as an example of the horror genre, purposely withholds information and reveals minute details bit by bit.

As scenes like this from *Alien*'s opening demonstrate, there is a cognitive impulse in spectators to interpret and interact with the narrative, but, as I argue throughout this study, ToM is not contingent on biological impulses alone. It *is* an inherent and hardwired cognitive ability, but one that requires knowledge of environment, including people's behavior and cultural representations, to work properly. In evolutionary discourse, ToM is often described as an added feature, increasing an individual's chances of survival. Within the reality of the film, recognizing villains and hero-survivors serves ToM's biological and social purpose, because predicting an enemy or an ally increases the characters' chances of survival and ability to adapt to numerous social environments. In terms of cinema and spectatorship, the recognition of threatened and threatening characters also improves viewers' mind-reading capabilities through interpretations and deployments of accumulated knowledge. Modern horror deliberately challenges spectators; heroes and villains are sometimes wrongly identified, and threats may be left unresolved or unexplained, but it is these challenges that provoke further mind reading and produce pleasure. Whether assumptions are correct or not, spectatorial enjoyment is illustrated reciprocally, as ToM stimulates pleasure, and horror films like *Alien* strongly stimulate ToM.

Critics of ToM wrongly assume this cognitive faculty is ahistorical. As I demonstrate in my research, ToM is not a simple artifact of biological hardwiring; it is unquestionably context-dependent. To borrow Lisa Zunshine's words:

Attributing states of mind is the default way by which we construct our social environment...[ToM] is supported not by one uniform cognitive

adaptation but by a large cluster of specialized adaptations geared toward a variety of social contexts (6, 8).

Zunshine is claiming that the ToM function is context-sensitive as a result of our development as a social species (8). Spectators, as part of a social species, may have a preoccupation with sorting out truth from fiction when watching horror cinema, but their understanding of the two is unquestionably context-dependent. In short, ToM is an intrinsic mental trait that is manifested and developed by a variety of social contexts. In fact, as I have suggested, these very contexts are challenged by the complicated material horror presents. Questions of history, gender, and, in the case of *Alien*, humanness itself should not be overlooked, since they are biological social constructions that constitute viewers' ToM. Feelings of confusion, shock, or uncanniness are only achieved if films acknowledge what spectators deem ordinary by deliberately going against it. As viewers compare *Alien*'s narrative with what they understand to be accurate in their own realities, they may experience displeasure, but they also enjoy exercising their ToM while watching characters do the same. Besides, spectatorial enjoyment is generated through the meeting of biological urges and cultural conditioning; this process opens up possibilities for seeing cultural changes outside *Alien*'s narrative as well.

I have selected *Alien* as my object of study, because it presents ToM's meeting of the biological and the cultural with striking precision. A literal manifestation of hardwiring appears in the film's male cyborg Ash, whereas the female human, Ripley, exhibits the influences of culture and environment on her development. But, as I stress throughout this study, both characters illustrate the influences of biological and cultural ToM and demonstrate how these influences are constantly intertwined. ToM's biological

and cultural impulses are dependent on each other, and the interaction of these two previously separated spheres opens up posthuman possibilities. The posthuman, then, is in the act of embodying fluid identities and perceiving the world as made up of such, too. As representative of the horror genre at large, *Alien*'s value lies in its ability to challenge multiple differences, including biological/cultural, masculine/feminine, human/android—and even nature/nurture. For this reason, the following chapters of my study will focus on one of the two characters, Ash and Ripley, and a corresponding term from each of the foregoing oppositions. Additionally, I devote Chapter Two to the intrinsic biological features of ToM, while in Chapter Three, I discuss the social environment that constantly informs it. Though apparently divided, the rhetorical purpose of this biological/cultural separation is not only to flesh out each with an extensive analysis, but also to prove how, on a posthumanist level, the numerous binaries initially presented in Ash and Ripley continuously complicate and modify each other and are difficult to sever.

The second chapter, “The Hardwired Mind: Programmed Character and Spectator Theories of Mind in *Alien*,” involves the cyborg character, Ash, and ToM's biological function, since Ash and ToM are presumably examples of hardwired or fixed features. Scenes analyzed in this section involve Ash and his application of ToM with other characters and specifically address how he anticipates others' thoughts and at times influences them for his programmed directive. Ash's hardwired circuitry is also linked to spectators' ToM and its biological origins and structures; however, because Ash is not alone on the *Nostromo* but placed in a social environment, I stress the importance of how he understands and predicts human complexities and conditions his ToM as a result. In terms of spectatorship and cultural constructs, Ash's blurring of gendered and 'human'



behavior challenges cultural knowledge and viewers' readings of *Alien*, which provides multiple illustrations of horror's splits from spectatorial expectations, since the gendered conduct and posthuman conditions of the film's characters go against convention. What's more, like the instinctive and learned facets of ToM, gender and humanness already invite a debate on whether they are naturally or culturally constructed. Through the anticipation, learning, and reconsideration of information that viewers interpret from *Alien*, ToM is pleasantly stimulated. Since ToM is a process, constant enhancement is beneficial to the spectator. Enriching my discussion in this chapter, I will also provide evidence of a breakdown of the masculine/feminine and human/android dichotomies present in Ash and Ripley and suggest that the complication of these binaries creates a posthuman transformation for these characters and spectators' ToM.

Chapter Three, "The Conditioned Mind: Contextualizing Character and Spectator Theories of Mind in *Alien*," then directs its focus to the character Ripley, along with the spectators' contextual histories that help shape their readings of *Alien*. I suggest that Ripley's and spectators' experiences are affected by their surroundings and therefore comprise a majority of the 'conditioned' aspect of ToM. For example, Ripley's familiarity with the Company's greed, the alien's method of breeding, and distrustful cyborgs are all past experiences influencing her ensuing actions with and assumptions about others. I gloss one scene from the *Alien* sequel, *Aliens*, to demonstrate this, particularly since Ripley's ToM is modified throughout her narrative. I repeatedly draw a parallel between Ripley's and spectators' ToM development, since the narrative also moves viewers to use their collected knowledge and life experiences when anticipating and navigating the fictional worlds with which they interact. Ripley's character appears

throughout the *Alien* quadrilogy and illustrates ToM expansion, since her opinions and assumptions about others stem from what she has learned. In fact, Ripley's experience with Ash inevitably affects her relations with all other androids presented in the series, but her attribution of mental states changes over the course of the narrative with the knowledge Ripley collects from observations and interpretations. Thus I argue that spectators' ToM is similarly challenged and conditioned, and this conditioning affords a pleasurable ToM workout.

To bring the union of ToM's evolutionary and environmental history full circle, I also remark in Chapter Three that Ripley's mind-reading moments are automatic responses ensuring her survival but are only necessary in social situations and only developed through the influence of Ripley's environment. I demonstrate how this, too, corresponds with spectatorship, since knowledge of horror tropes influences viewers' interpretation of *Alien*. For instance, spectators may note that a strong-willed female usually survives in the slasher film, but her characterization still resists their standard gender conventions. This example of gender is frequently revisited in Chapters Two and Three as one of the binaries complicated by *Alien*'s posthuman method of identification. As with Chapter Two and its demonstration with Ash, I use Ripley as another manifestation of a posthuman existence that rejects strict and finite categories. With Chapter Three's focus on the conditioning of spectatorial ToM, I illustrate the constant fluidity and transformation of mind reading for Ripley and her viewers, and how it all points to *Alien*'s delivery of a pleasurable and intensive workout for spectators that adds to their ever-developing ToM.

On the surface, Ash and Ripley represent a number of distinct categories, such as human/android, hardwired/conditioned, and masculine/feminine, but these distinctions become indistinct after examining Ash's and Ripley's expected actions and behaviors with the actions and behaviors they actually perform. Whether deceiving, revealing, employing, or extracting information, Ash and Ripley demonstrate ToM processes, which invariably calls upon spectators to do the same. Also, the entanglement of various binaries that these two characters exhibit is demonstrative of how ToM is in a constant state of flux. Though it is not a matter of survival for *Alien*'s viewers to properly anticipate the thoughts and intentions of on-screen characters, it nevertheless adds to spectators' stream of information and prods them towards more pleasurable stimulations of ToM. Ridley Scott's film remarkably modifies and confronts this cognitive faculty through its employment of the horror genre's unstable reality. But the information interpreted by viewers after watching *Alien* can network and negotiate with other visual narratives, too. Whatever spectators derive from one cinematic experience will invariably affect how they interact with and respond to others. In short, Ash's and Ripley's changing posthuman identities is similar to spectators' ToM; it is a pleasurable *process* rather than a fixed experience beginning and ending with *Alien*'s credits.

**Chapter Two:**  
**The ‘Hardwired’ Mind: Programmed Character and  
Spectator Theories of Mind in *Alien***

Scientists of evolutionary psychology argue that Theory of Mind emerged during a massive neurocognitive evolution in the Pleistocene era as a hardwired mechanism allowing humans to acclimate to social conditions (Zunshine 7). In another remote area of study, it is argued that science fiction creates, to a large extent, “the distinction between nature and culture” by presenting man-made technologies like the supercomputer (Schelde 13). With these two topics combined, *Alien*’s android figure, Ash, is an exemplary model of both ‘hardwired’ ToM evolution and nature/culture. He operates as the film’s secondary antagonist and is programmed with a specific set of instructions that go against his human coworkers’ best interest. As a result, Ash’s hardwiring appears in league with the same forces that helped evolve humans several eons ago. With this biological angle, pleasure exists through the engagement of spectators’ predisposed ToM, which, similar to Ash’s electrical impulses, prods viewers to perform and develop mind reading.

The hardwiring faculty of ToM and science fiction’s nature/culture dichotomy are therefore assembled together in the character of Ash. Yet in spite of programmed drives inherent in Ash and his spectators, I aim to prove how ToM does not function mechanically but is influenced by social surroundings and the invariable cultural

conditioning that accompanies everyday interactions, observations, and interpretations. As a result, this figure of artificial intelligence is meant to do more than primitive computations or adhere to predetermined binary codes. Ash cannot simply comply to or reject commands but must outwit, empathize with, or challenge the ToM of his human counterparts. To understand and anticipate human complexities, a *conditioned* ToM is warranted, not simply a programmed one. Thus Ash can be placed among a social species for his journey. Like humans, Ash perfectly melds the hardwired and environmentally-adapted features of ToM, allowing him to better interact with and interpret his surroundings. Incidentally, Ash's significance to this discussion lies in his very 'nature.' Functioning as a cyborg, Ash's existence as both mechanical and organic positions him outside a binary, which is where spectatorial ToM is located, since it, too, enlists the biological and the cultural. The entanglement of this binary is not only appropriate to horror's penchant for disrupting cultural codes, but it also stimulates, in intense and pleasurable ways, viewers' ToM, pushing them to better adapt to the realities of their world or an irregular one in a film like *Alien*.

Endowed with a hardwired directive, Ash uses his ToM to calculate his fellow crewmembers' actions and influence their decisions. His corporate employer Weyland-Yutani (most often introduced simply as The Company) designs Ash to ensure a safe transport of the alien life form at the expense of the other crewmembers, and Ash's use of ToM nearly achieves this. Thomas B. Byers deduces, "The crew's ordeals and their deaths result in large part from the fact that they cannot tell Ash from themselves until it is too late" (40-41). Byers' observation is undoubtedly true, since all but Ripley meet their end because of Ash's crafty performance. His mechanical design is masked; Ash's

communication with others exceeds automatic responses, because his ToM adapts in varying social scenarios to complex behavior. In one particular scene, a few crewmembers, Dallas, Lambert, and Kane, explore the source of a derelict ship's distress call, while Ash and Ripley remain aboard the *Nostramo* to analyze the situation. After interpreting that the call is a warning transmission, Ripley notifies Ash over an intercom. It is important to note here that because of this form of communication, Ripley cannot see Ash's reactions but can only hear them, which impairs her ToM judgment to analyze only auditory cues rather than visual signals. To explicate, Ripley's intention to go out after the crew is barely uttered before Ash already anticipates Ripley's thought and hangs his head in dismay. This physical gesture would certainly appear suspicious to Ripley, but over voice transmission, Ash can effortlessly deceive her. Ash responds to Ripley's concern, "What's the point?" but promptly realizes this comes off as a callous remark and revises, "I mean, by the time it takes to get there, they'll know if it's a warning or not, yes?" Ripley considers the logic in this and remains aboard the ship.

Understanding that Ripley's original decision could ruin The Company's secret mission, Ash cunningly maneuvers her to a different course of action. He even ends with the rhetorical "yes?" so as to preserve Ripley's feeling of autonomy. Allowing her to believe she is not forced into a decision is pivotal; it thwarts any suspicion about Ash's real motive, since Ripley can interpret his reply as a composed and logical suggestion rather than a desperate demand. However, Ash's ability to assess Ripley's ToM and conceal his own influences her decision-making. Having the upper hand, Ash strives to hide specific information, which permits him to control Ripley's interpretations of his behavior. Not to say her ToM is faulty, but Ash knows more about the situation than

Ripley, since The Company has programmed him with secret “Order #937: Bring back alien life form. Crew expendable.” This mastery and fallibility of ToM between Ash and Ripley replicates spectatorial experiences with the film, since false inferences can be made about characters that *Alien*, and any other film, deliberately misrepresent. To borrow Liza Zunshine’s words, within ToM interactions,

mind-reading, mind-misreading, and mind-concealing are truly equal opportunity endeavors, even if specific historical epochs have worked hard to ascribe either subhuman or superhuman qualities to [characters] of specific social and ethnic backgrounds. ...One mind is as good a candidate for being concealed, misread, and willfully misrepresented as any other. (138)

Horror films, and *Alien* particularly, conceal minds and have them misread, but pleasure stems from forming assumptions, renegotiating these assumptions as more observations are made, and continuing to stimulate the ToM process. Good horror films also go against the very mores they set up in their storyline, since this produces an intense cognitive workout for spectators. For example, the beginning of *Alien* presents a benevolent Company that orders its crew to investigate a possible SOS signal, but it is later unveiled that a multilayered betrayal scheme is in the works. This experience generates enjoyment, as viewers are stirred into forming more questions and interpretations as the film progresses. Turning the screw once more, horror carries out these ToM games inconspicuously, as Ash effectively demonstrates with Ripley, and spectators persistently improve their ToM through these challenges.

Ash's 'mind-reading' moment with Ripley is of further importance, since he understands that his initial remark, "What's the point?," would be interpreted as a disregard for the other crewmates. Ash does, spectators later discover, harbor a disregard for his colleagues, but following the rules of ToM, he considers *Ripley's* mental state, not just his own. Detecting insensitivity would arouse distrust and cause Ripley to question all of Ash's subsequent actions, since ToM allows Ripley and the spectator to make observations and stow them away for later use. Therefore, Ash's second response appears to Ripley as a sensible suggestion that does not necessarily neglect a concern for the crew, and Ash knows this. As a science officer, his thought process is built on the reputation of being a methodical and rule-oriented worker. It is a clever move on Ash's part to propose a hypothetical and scientific scenario, "by the time it takes to get there..." that plainly indicates a more efficient solution for Ripley: letting the search crew discover the warning themselves. It not only keeps Ripley from ruining 'Order #937,' but also simultaneously prevents her from doubting Ash's motives in future situations, since he stays true to his character as a man of science. Knowing he narrowly dodges a failed mission at the hands of Ripley, Ash breathes a heavy sigh of relief before the shot transitions.

In a moment of frantic revelation later in the film, Ash gets decapitated after trying to choke Ripley, to which the ship's chief engineer Parker shouts in response, "It's a robot! Ash is a goddamned robot!" But the shot does more than present a malformed villain getting his just deserts. This instant of Cartesian terror boasts a literal separation of mind and body. Through this physical division, viewers observe how Ash seemed to previously manifest a human self, though now spectators see Ash's inner workings as a



collection of marbles, tubes, and milky fluid and regard him as machine. Roz Kaveney adds, “We see Ash as a monster; to himself he is a chimera, radically compromised by his appearance of humanity and capacity to pass” (145). This all provokes a discussion on Ash’s posthuman properties, since he has straddled ideological oppositions until the moment he is explicitly severed. When Louis Althusser wrote on theoretical posthumanism, he noted, “It is impossible to know anything about men” except that “the myth of man is reduced to ashes” (qtd. in Maspero 229). In light of Althusser’s last word, the very name of *Alien*’s posthuman cyborg figure and the consequences he presents for traditional methods of identification are appropriate. Ash is not Parker’s “goddamned robot” that threatens the humanist concept of mankind. His complex identity as a cyborg and the biological/cultural ToM that he develops open up a posthuman panorama, resultantly expanding spectators’ view of cultural categories and conditioning their ToM for more pleasurable readings in *Alien*’s narrative and beyond.

Through the astonishing display of a hardwired and conditioned ToM, *Alien* breaks down ideological oppositions, including human/android. Traditional concepts behind machine-minds propose that “sets of binary oppositions” are “programmed into a finite set of instructions” that “switch on or off” (Schelde 132-33), which situate the behavior of androids in a rigid pose alongside humanity’s versatile performance. But Ash is exclusive of this design; he surpasses binary codes in more ways than just the mechanical level. Ash bears the mental complexities of a human, such as sarcasm, deceit, learning, and memory, and his computer hardwiring, relatable to a person’s genetic coding, gives him a predisposed function. Ash’s programmed ToM imparts him with the drive to collect information, not to mention he is electronically engineered with motor

abilities. But Ash's conditioned ToM gives him self-awareness and awareness of others. In this sense, humanness cannot be restricted to some organic being. Ash's cyborg identity rejects dualistic thinking and complicates the traditional limitations of 'self' through cultural binaries. Spectators therefore renegotiate such methods of identification and condition their ToM to better interpret how other films of the horror genre do the same.

When dealing with artificial intelligence, Lisa Yaszek's study of cybernetics particularly examines the interesting figure of the cyborg, who is a posthumanist hybrid (98), "part-organic, part-technological" (4). Yaszek and other cyberneticists see the new body of the twenty-first century in terms of its ability to adapt to and act upon its environment through reproductions of messages and signals (7); it is a communications network. This unveils the complex condition of Ash, since his ToM corresponds with both biological hardwiring and environmental stimuli (just like humans). Ash's existence as a cyborg and the corresponding posthuman ToM he possesses propels viewers past the traditional understanding of identity and how ToM operates and into spectators' own posthuman conditions. Ash illustrates Yaszek's definition masterfully by networking with his surroundings through internal programming and external cues.

It is also in the moment when the alien monster is introduced that Yaszek's description of this new body takes form. During his evaluation of the creature, Ash explains in awe, "It's adapted remarkably well to our environment," and Parker, too, claims, "It's like a [hu]man." These comments certainly correspond with Ash, Ripley, and *Alien*'s spectators as well; the ToM they all possess is a biological artifact that adapts

to environments through experience. For Ash particularly, Mary Pharr notes that while he catalogues the creatures' traits, Ash is actually describing his ideal self (135):

The perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility. (Lambert): You admire it. (Ash): I admire its purity. A survivor unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality. I can't lie to you about your chances, but you have my sympathies.

As Pharr interprets, Ash saw in the alien creature qualities that he could not own himself. Though not an image of the ideal machine or "perfect organism," Ash is not without conscience or morality; he has sympathies, albeit they are sarcastically rendered to Ripley and the remaining crew, but he still exhibits complex mental traits in this regard. As a result, Ash's capacity for ToM moves him beyond simple electrical impulses.

Moreover, Ash's ToM is not fixed but exists as a conduit between outside forces and interior thinking—much like the human spectator processing visual media. To use his wording, Ash sets about "collating" information he observes. For example, while in his science lab, Ash examines the characteristics of Kane's facehugger: the parasitic creature that attaches itself to Kane's face in order to implant him with an alien embryo. Ash particularly observes that the combination of the facehugger's structural elements "gives him a prolonged resistance to adverse environmental conditions." Though Ash is discussing the facehugger's acidic blood and outer shell of protein polysaccharides, it is notable that the externally and internally motivated functions of Ash's ToM allow him to also resist "adverse environmental conditions." For example, alluding back to his dialogue with Ripley and the distress call, Ash protects himself against skepticism from crewmembers by anticipating their thoughts. Ash 'collates' observations about his

surroundings so as to better adapt to his social environment. In a similar vein, the human spectator observes the film, pulls together information and develops inferences so as to have a greater understanding of the fictional world they are watching. This is valuable and pleasurable to viewers, because, to garner this understanding, they are motivated to enhance their ToM in an environment that flexes long-established divisions of gender and humanness. These newly presented posthuman categories force spectators' traditional knowledge to also confront "adverse environmental conditions;" but through conditioning, spectators' developing ToM similarly helps them acquire a "prolonged resistance" to antiquated modes of identification.

Bearing out horror's entangled identification constructs, Ash's and Ripley's reversal of gendered behavior is an example of spectators confronting new knowledge and adapting. Ash bears the outward appearance and mannerisms of a male, but when violently cast out of the closet in his decapitation scene, his design becomes blurred (posthuman), seeming to comprise "a perverse sexuality" as a "feminized male-gendered creation" (Gallardo and Smith 50). Interestingly, Ash's disembodiment pitches its flag in Carol J. Clover's territory as a manifestation of slasher narratives' castrated killer and phallicized female-survivor model. Ash undergoes a literal and metaphoric castration, as his head is removed from his body at the hands of a strong-willed female. His feminization in the moment of his defeat comes from Ash's status as a "being created, defined, controlled, and deprived of power by the patriarchy" (Gallardo and Smith 49), namely The Company in *Alien*'s narrative. The moment he is discovered as a pawn of The Company, Ash's masculine autonomy seems drained like the ejaculate fluid his body spurts out.

But prior to Ash's termination, he also complicated the masculine/feminine opposition in the film's early stages. For instance, Ash initially appears as the ideal Company man, adhering to the rules and regulations enforced by his employers and his profession. But when Kane is brutally attacked, and his health becomes dependent upon treatment, Ash apparently loses his rationality; in one swift benevolent motion, he opens the airlock (against Ripley's command) to get Kane aboard, which effectively misleads viewers' readings of him. Even in retrospect, the posthuman is borne out as Ash complicates rigid categorical codes by appearing compassionate and conniving simultaneously. In his article, "Feminism, Humanism, and Science in *Alien*," critic James H. Kavanagh proffers an analysis of the cyborg's complexities and spectatorial identifications with it. Kavanagh recurrently remarks how spectators invest sympathies in characters exhibiting heroic or benevolent traits, and with these observations, viewers can slowly register the film's heroes and villains (75). Without intending to wander into the field of cognitive studies, Kavanagh discusses how spectators' sympathies are initially guided towards Ash (75), because, by feigning human kindness, he is able to mask his sinister intentions. Ash is seemingly concerned for Kane's condition and violates quarantine protocol to allow him aboard the ship for medical assistance, while Ripley is unaffected by her comrade's plight and sticks to protocol despite the pleas from her other crewmembers. As a man and a man of science, Ash's compassionate actions seem uncharacteristic. For Ripley, this is doubly the case. Science fiction films leading up to *Alien*'s release rejected a female protagonist or at least a female heroine demonstrating "rebellious skepticism" (Pharr 135), and spectators might expect Ripley to follow her female counterpart, Lambert, and exhibit emotional weakness. Similarly, science and

reason are characteristically gendered masculine disciplines. In order for Ash to perform a ‘feminized’ act of compassion and supposedly nurse Kane back to health, he must reject his responsibilities as science officer and break protocol. Thus, both Ash and Ripley disassemble gendered cultural constructs through their performances.

In hindsight, this scene displaying Kane’s plight even confounds the clues that Ash is a cyborg; it would seem Ripley is unfeeling and spouts off involuntary responses, while Ash possesses human sympathy and altruistic behavior. That which made Ash and Ripley distinct from one another gets reversed, but Thomas B. Byers offers a crucial point for my argument, noting, “What has traditionally been regarded as a difference between the human and the robotic” is actually a “difference within the human” (44). In a way, Byers is correct, since his argument rejects dualist thinking; however, to term this site of paradoxical differences as ‘human’ is problematic for a posthuman discussion, because it bears certain ideological assumptions that are already being beautifully challenged by Ash and Ripley. Since both characters have demonstrated a capacity for cruel or charitable actions, Ash and Ripley once more establish the posthuman renegotiation of human/android and masculine/feminine oppositions in the same way that they renegotiate the biological/cultural binary of ToM. Their posthuman identities, and more importantly their posthuman cognitive abilities, close the conventional gaps between these previously opposing categories.

Moreover, this scene provides an illustration of horror’s momentary split from spectatorial expectation, since the humanness/humaneness of these characters goes against convention (androids are insensitive, while humans are compassionate) as well as their gendered behavior. Though viewers may form inferences that are further

complicated or proven false as *Alien* progresses, pleasure is not stimulated by how similar the story is to spectators' real world, but is a result of the film's contributions to their ever-developing ToM. Also, the posthuman circumstances surrounding Ash's and Ripley's narratives potentially equip viewers with posthuman understandings, since they are compelled to consider the fluidity of cultural categories.

From these scenes, spectatorial gratification may also generate from a variety of factors, such as the strong attractive female overcoming her enemies, the alien creature's gory method of attack, or perhaps the existence of a cyborg and the futuristic possibilities he puts forward, but they are all inextricably bound to the process of tracking mental states and adding to or altering ToM. For instance, spectators observing Ash's actions prior to his reveal as a double agent may devise specific reasons for his behavior based on what the film has decided to disclose or their own cultural contexts. Ash's slight irritation with Ripley during the distress call scene might actually appear to first-time viewers as frustration. He told the crew that their contracts mandated a search but now feels responsible for putting their lives in danger and is burdened by the mistake. But bearing the reputation as a man devoted to knowledge, rules, and mathematical accuracy (something the film strives to portray), Ash may be incapable of admitting his lapse in thinking. Viewers later realize how these initially insignificant observations actually had great bearing on the issue at hand. Ash *is* a traitorous cyborg, and in retrospect there were clues misread or perhaps concealed, which now lead spectators to their 'Aha!' moment.

Pleasure released in a moment of revelation exists when information gathered on various minds finds its proper place or at least, for the horror film, finds a place at all. Noël Carroll would say this is the climactic instant in horror when questions are answered

for the spectator—even the questions spectators did not intentionally pose before more information solved them anyway. But I contend that moments like Ash’s unveiling may only lead to more questions for *Alien*’s spectators to consciously or unconsciously consider, including, ‘Who else on the *Nostramo* might be a traitor?’ ‘Are all cyborgs mistrustful?’ ‘Is this a recurring theme in sci-fi horror?’ In this way, *Alien*’s narrative interacts and exercises with viewers’ ever-changing ToM even after the closing credits. More importantly, the posthuman conditions that *Alien* demonstrates is a common tendency in the horror genre, as cultural categories are stretched, ignored, or perverted. Experiencing the complication of binaries through the posthuman figures Ash and Ripley pushes viewers to move beyond conventional readings of such cinematic narratives, and the biological/cultural blend of ToM prepares spectators for these posthuman moves. Though this chapter underscores the programmed origins of ToM and Ash’s seemingly robotic manufacture, Donna J. Haraway bolsters my argumentative turn towards the posthuman when famously noting, “We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are all cyborgs” (qtd. in Bell 99).



**Chapter Three:**  
**The ‘Conditioned’ Mind: Contextualizing Character and  
Spectator Theories of Mind in *Alien***

A scene unfolds at the height of *Alien*'s plot showing the eponymous creature lurking in the ship's airshafts. *Nostramo*'s captain, Dallas, decides to brave the labyrinthine tunnels and corner the alien with a flamethrower, effectively blasting it from the ducts and out into space. Unluckily, the alien escapes detection from the crew's advanced tracking equipment and attacks Dallas before the plan can succeed. The remaining survivors, Ash, Lambert, Parker, and Ripley consider several options, but Ripley and Parker agree that killing the creature before heading home is the proper method. Parker resolutely walks off to "kill that goddamned thing right now," yet Ripley stops him to discuss the details. In this moment that Ripley begins to speak, Parker holds up his hand, and Ripley subsequently increases the pitch of her voice. The brief remainder of the scene shows the two bickering and helps embellish inferences made by spectators: viewers might interpret that Parker intended to quiet Ripley with his hand motion because he wants to kill the alien without further debate, and Ripley, comprehending Parker's hand motion, talks louder as a retort. Though this attribution of the characters' states of mind may be incorrect, pleasure occurs in the ability and process to make such an inference.

Similar to breathing or blinking, Theory of Mind is a biological function allowing

people, like *Alien*'s spectators, to intuitively process observed behavior. However, nothing in the mechanical form of Parker's gesture or Ripley's voice advises spectators on how to interpret the meaning of their actions; it could be assumed that Parker has had an arm spasm, and Ripley has gone deaf. A gamut of explanations from the physiological to the psychological could occur. Yet spectators read and make sense of Parker's and Ripley's mannerisms within a context derived from their present culture and experiences. This context delimits the scope of possible wrong explanations. For instance, the hardwired institution of ToM kicks in while watching the scene, but knowledge resulting from spectators' personal history or knowledge gained from *Alien*'s exposition eliminates irrelevant interpretations. Thus, spectators can explain or predict *better* correlations between the characters' actions and their underlying mental states.

In the reality of the film, Ripley's anticipation of forthcoming events and assumptions about others are also precipitated by endless observations. Ripley's survival to the end provides spectators with the longest streak of ToM interaction in a single character, and her status as human ostensibly marks Ripley as an example of this particular chapter's slant in ToM's hardwired/conditioned paradigm. Chapter Two initially focused on ToM as an automatic cognitive tool best personified by the film's android character, Ash. Like Ash's, Ripley's ToM is effortless and involuntary, but as a human, her social environment more clearly influences and contextualizes it. In fact for Ripley and the spectators watching her, "social survival depends on being able to imagine—correctly, incorrectly, approximately, self-servingly, bizarrely—other people's thoughts, desires, and intentions around the clock" (Zunshine 18). The cognitive 'health' of ToM relies on constant stimulation and exercise, which is conceivably another reason

why fiction, like cinema and particularly *Alien*, is enjoyable. *Alien*, therefore, constructs a ToM playground for its characters and viewers. Ripley possesses a conditioned ToM, *Alien*'s spectators possess a conditioned ToM, and pleasure arises through the conditioning of ToM's hardwired function.

Having established and complicated the presence of a hardwired and conditioned ToM in Chapter Two, I deepen the discussion with spectators' cultural context as a guiding force for their cinematic readings. Gender, a topic visited in the last chapter, is bound up in cultural history as a 'construction' enabled by the public's expectations. Interestingly then, Judith Newton aptly recounts how *Alien*'s gendered behavior does not align with tradition and therefore challenges the contextual history that informs spectators' readings. Newton asserts:

Ripley's character appropriates qualities traditionally identified with male heroes. Ripley is skilled, she makes hard, unsentimental decisions; she is a firm but humane leader; she has the hero's traditional, and thrilling resources in the face of the monster...and her quest is not diluted by the introduction of a love plot. (84)

Then again, unconventional genders are a common characteristic of the modern slasher films with which *Alien* engages. Most notably, Carol J. Clover makes this observation while outlining slasher cinema's creation of the phallicized female protagonist, who is usually forceful, proactive, masculine, and abstains from sex (this last bit being important, since it withholds the idea of an accessible female body). Among the group of horror films' female heroes, Ripley characterizes Clover's description and the values and

virtues common to male protagonists, since she is rational, willful, largely appears androgynous, and has a masculine-sounding name.

But despite the frequency of horror's disruption of gender conventions, viewers still recognize *Alien*'s presentation of gender as skewed, because it does not corroborate with what they learn in their own environment. Characteristics of the sci-fi genre are compromised in *Alien*, since the film abandons what Patricia Melzer notes is a "mainly white, male, heterosexual" or "male-oriented genre" (6, 7). Melzer continues to explain that much of classic sci-fi fiction "relies on the binary of man/woman in its reimagining of social orders" (220). Melzer's comment further establishes *Alien*'s horror status, because characters like Ripley violate heteronormative behavior and destabilize gender differences. *Alien* notably blurs the distinction between several established binaries, including masculine/feminine and human/android as demonstrated through Ash's and Ripley's separate treatment of Kane. As noted in Chapter Two, the 'male' Ash appears benevolent and endearing to Kane's condition while the 'female' Ripley comes off as aggressive and insensitive.

Ripley's complication of these binaries is further referenced in Vivian Sobchack's study of the film, as she notes, "The original script of *Alien* conceived Ripley as a male," however "few changes were made to accommodate the differences that such a sex change in the character might present. Ripley, indeed, is hardly female (and considered by her shipmates as hardly human)" (106). Sobchack examines how the film tears down such binaries through the phrases, "hardly female" and "hardly human." Ripley resultantly exhibits a posthuman condition by going beyond ideological constraints; she is not wholly 'female' or 'human' in the traditional sense of these terms, nor is she wholly their

opposite. Clover also seems to touch upon the possibility of posthumanism when analyzing female heroes' disruption of gender constructs. By discussing a "loosening of categories" (63), Clover mentions a type of fluidity occurring in the identity of horror's female protagonists. When interpreting the surpassing of such ideological oppositions by the character Ripley (or Ash), spectators also progress towards a posthumanist reading and, with the conditioning of their hardwired minds through these readings, a posthuman ToM. This posthuman conditioning fosters spectatorial pleasure, even amid the displeasure of a strange and threatening world, since it develops and improves viewers' ToM to rethink cultural binaries and the fluidity and vacillation that occur in either real or fictional social settings.

As a result, pleasure lies in the process of and experimentation with ToM despite *Alien's* break from spectator's expectations of character conduct. Leda Cosmides and John Tooby explain that "within the context of the extraordinary diversity of the living world," humans evolved to interpret "information based on relationships that were 'true' only temporarily, locally, and contingently rather than universally and stably" (53, 57). This substantiates why pleasure in the horror film cannot stem from how closely a narrative follows strict cultural conventions. Though cultural conventions have a running dialogue with horror, spectatorial pleasure results from viewers' ToM responding and adapting to whatever rules the film puts forth. As Cosmides and Tooby would put it, viewers read a horror film and rely on its 'truths' inside a space of conditions to which they are applicable. This tension between knowledge derived in the real world and film world causes an intense workout for spectators' ToM and prompts them to consider the differences after the film has ended. Yet viewers still interpret *Alien's* novel arrangement

of cultural constructs and construe the meaning of the film's remaining scenes based on them. To explicate, *Alien*'s spectators (upon recognizing Ripley as a female) soon learn that Ripley's behavior is uncharacteristic of the gender they understand outside of the film, but then place Ripley in new contextual parameters and deem her a figure likely to exhibit gutsy behavior. It is then unsurprising to viewers that Ripley would approach the alien creature at the film's end rather than cower in fear. Viewing subsequent scenes where Ripley exhibits 'male' traits should no longer startle spectators' expectations of her. They learned from previous observations that Ripley, among others, act differently, thus equipping themselves with more knowledge, which better informs spectators' inferences about characters in future readings.

Ripley's feminine/masculine empowerment and *Alien*'s continued ToM interplay are also examinable in the most befitting of places: Ash's science laboratory. Outraged at Ash's violation of "basic quarantine law," Ripley questions his decision to allow Kane and his "guest" aboard the ship. Through their discussion, Ripley emphasizes the dangers of allowing Kane on *Nostramo*, "You forgot the science division's basic quarantine law...Unfortunately by breaking quarantine, you risk everybody's life." Ash, in an attempt to validate breaking policy, strikes up a seemingly benevolent stance, "Maybe I should've left [Kane] outside. Maybe I've jeopardized the rest of us, but it was a risk I was willing to take." Yet Ripley detects an incongruity and immediately questions Ash's reasoning, "It's a pretty big risk for a science officer- it's not exactly out of the manual, is it?" Mirroring Ash's response during the 'distress call' scene described in Chapter Two, Ripley's comment ends with a rhetorical question but this time as an effort to highlight Ash's professional flaw. Previous interactions informed Ripley's and spectators' original

assessment of Ash as a man adhering to protocol, because, for the past forty-five minutes of the film, he has only been seen analyzing data, following a mandated schedule, and restating details from the Company's contract. In fact, his communication with the rest of the crew, and any camaraderie that could result from it, is limited by these activities. Based on these observations, Ash would appear as a man devoted to his employed position as a science officer. His actions leading up to Kane's attack are prompted by a desire for logical resolutions, especially those grounded in The Company's policy.

What's more, following their long hypersleep at the film's start, Ash does not participate while the crew blathers on at the breakfast table. Instead, he seems annoyed by the inane discussion and calls attention to a message from the ship's supercomputer, Mother. As a result, Ripley is provoked to interrogate Ash when he does not act in accordance with her reading of him as a practical and methodical man. To satisfy the biological and empirical impulses of ToM, Ripley must collect new information about Ash to revise her assumptions, which results in her trip to his lab. Ripley has the innate function to continue stimulating her ToM, but also, within the social context, it is essential for her to make sense of Ash's behavior to better interact in, survive in, and anticipate the ship's communal environment. For instance, when Ash ends Ripley's unprompted inquisition with a dismissive statement, "You do your job and let me do mine," her suspicion is ignited. Ash's response could read as an assertion that he is capable of following policy, or perhaps he is baring his desire to remain focused on Kane's treatment without further distraction; yet Ripley's ToM affords her a supplemental reading of the situation.

After witnessing Ash's careless decision to open the airlock and admit Kane on

board, Ripley comprehends that professional earnestness does not always adhere with Ash's actions. He did not comply with the rules of his occupation during the quarantine failure therefore causing Ripley to doubt Ash's seemingly renewed sense of professionalism. The desperation and slight patronizing tone in Ash's abrupt end to the conversation are also thinly veiled, and Ripley, sensing it, decides to keep her suspicions alive and interpret more observations in an effort to situate her doubts within her growing ToM. Harkening back to Noël Carroll's writings, this seems to similarly correspond with finding answers or "outcomes to questions" (in this case, Ripley's 'suspicions') that are "put in motion" (179). However, as I have argued throughout this study, ToM is in constant motion, and whether spectators agree at this moment in *Alien's* narrative that Ash is deceitful or not, Ripley's skepticism is added to the currents of their thinking. After all, the crew's captain, Dallas, cues viewers to remain on constant alert. When demanding an explanation for allotting Ash custody of a comatose Kane, Ripley expresses her distrust in Ash to which Dallas replies, "I don't trust anybody." His remark is a warning for spectators when reading and devising explanations for character's actions, and with the limited knowledge of each character this early in the film, Dallas' words appear prophetic. Consequently, watching the film becomes a ToM game for viewers to invest their mental energies in successfully predicting a traitor.

But apart from this potentially drawn-out task to detect betrayal, spectators know for the moment that Ripley expects some underhanded scheme from Ash. In the same scene that records Ripley and Parker arguing over a plan to kill the alien, Ripley asks Ash for advice, "Any suggestions from you or Mother?" After a few measured seconds, Ash reports, "No, we're still collating." The "no" that Ripley hears prompts her to



momentarily shut her eyes: a physical act not far from the effects of a deep mournful sigh. Ripley follows this gesture with a bellowing out of what viewers comprehend is an uneasy laugh. Spectators thus observe Ripley's 'scoff' to Ash and are able to explain her underlying mental state: she does not believe him. This is quickly validated as Ripley aggressively questions his answer:

You're what? You're still collating? I find that hard to believe. (Ash):

Well what would you like me to do? (Ripley): Just what you've been doing, Ash. ... Nothing.

Ripley's verbal assault toward Ash illustrates her distrust, which correlates with viewers' perception of her physical gestures. Spectators interpret the scene with observations that confirm previous suspicions about the film's characters; for instance, Ash is not aiding the crew's dilemma, as Ripley fervently pointed out after quarantine policy was breached. But these observations also lead viewers to form further predictions and continue exercising their ToM. Building off of my example, spectators might assume that Ash does not help, because he may be too timid to confront the alien, or he might be telling the truth about his fruitless analysis of the creature. Either way, questions and observations continue to emerge during ToM interplay. For Ripley and *Alien*'s spectators, questions and answers are not stagnant pieces of information stirred into motion or collected at any time. Rather they pleasurably add to an ever-flowing ToM and are subject to personal interpretation: a process that compels the characters in and viewers of the film to persist with mind reading.

While commenting on ToM unknowingly, Patricia Melzer proclaims, "The [*Alien*] movies can be treated as 'one extended work' based on the unity provided by the

protagonist, Ellen Ripley” and later attributes this amalgamation of the *Alien* series to “the expectations of the audience” (108). These ‘expectations’ to which Melzer refers are the very ones created and regulated by ToM. As I argue in this chapter and the previous one, *Alien* and other such works of horror cinema endlessly exercise rather than automatically perform given psychological tendencies. The entanglement of gender constructs and posthuman properties calls upon spectators to interact and interpret *Alien*’s story by using their ToM. The contextualization of a hardwired cognitive function also propels ToM beyond a strict Darwinian understanding that may only discuss the purpose of its biological origins. Instead of operating as a fixed storehouse, ToM is a current of information and experiences that both alters and is altered. In the case of Ash’s reveal in *Alien* as a traitorous character, theories about his behavior may seem permanently answered for viewers, since they now understand he was a traitor for The Company. Yet this information, and how spectators and Ripley perceive it, is not stored as an unchanging morsel of memory. Spectators watching the film again, the rest of the *Alien* quadrilogy, or other films with cyborgs reuse its information during mind-reading moments. Pleasure in this flowing process is simply outlined: observations and their interpretations lead to plausible answers that fuel spectators to form further assumptions and further conclusions.

Because expectations and evaluations of *Alien* are governed by viewer’s developing knowledge and experience with cultural ideologies, Ripley perfectly replicates spectators’ ToM performance; her ToM is continually modified by her history, and the second film of the quadrilogy, *Aliens*, wholly demonstrates this. Following her traumatic experiences with Ash, Ripley assumes that all corporate-owned cyborgs are of

the same deceptive nature. This is notably demonstrated in a scene aboard the *Sulaco*, a Company-owned ship headed towards the now colonized planet where the crew from *Alien* first encountered the alien life form. Sent on a mission with several marines, Ripley sits at a table during dinner and is quickly joined by a man named Bishop. After congenially offering some cornbread, Bishop examines a cut on his finger from which a drip of white synthetic blood emerges. In horror, Ripley censures her employer, “You never said anything about an android being on board!.” Bishop asks why she is concerned, but Ripley refuses communication with him and later violently knocks the tray of cornbread from his hand, stating, “Just stay away from me, Bishop! You got that straight?!” There is brief exposition offered by another character to explain Ripley’s consternation, but spectators of the first and second films can already make sense of the situation. Ripley’s conduct is fueled by inferences made from a previous relationship that seems analogous to the current one she is experiencing; thus Ripley bases her assumptions about cyborgs within the only context she has. This is also true for spectators who initially read a horror film against their cultural context, but later (similar to Ripley observing Bishop’s self-sacrificing choices) spectators condition and reevaluate their readings within the film’s new context. The pleasure inherent in developing and exercising ToM pushes spectators to also consider *Alien*’s context and its posthuman breakdown of cultural binaries in their real environment, since, as Cosmides and Tooby affirmed, no information is “universal and stable” (57). Indeed, the use of a posthuman ToM may help viewers find that renegotiating and expanding personal and cultural knowledge is also valuable to circumstances outside *Alien*’s narrative.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **Conclusion: Pleasure Beyond the Narrative**

To understand pleasure in the horror film, my thesis started by responding to the writings of Carol J. Clover and Noël Carroll, both of whom offer momentous contributions for situating spectatorial enjoyment in horror narratives. Clover's psychoanalytic study observes that young male viewers begin to satisfy sadistic tendencies and later cross gender lines to identify with horror's female hero. Carroll's cognitive theory finds that euphoric relief is aroused as questions and expectations are fulfilled by the film's conclusion. Both arguments discuss the cultural categories, including gender, that horror complicates. My argument acknowledged these explanations but moved beyond theories that understand pleasure through singular and rather fixed experiences that begin and end a film. Theory of Mind approaches the question of pleasure differently, since it is a process felt before, during, and after a narrative that offers pleasurable conditionings of knowledge. As demonstrated with Ridley Scott's *Alien*, this mind reading ability permits viewers to form interpretations that call upon personal experiences and cultural contexts. ToM causes expectations to be challenged and knowledge to be modified when watching *Alien* and other films of its genre and encourages spectators to navigate the worlds portrayed in cinematic fiction while also structuring and restructuring those worlds. ToM is, after all, a stream constantly flowing and changing with more observations and experiences; it is an

explanation that takes into account the flux and impermanence of information (not all spectators perceive, interpret, or remember a scene the same way) as well as the diversity of viewers watching the film (men, women, non-horror fans, and horror buffs all possess ToM).

To ascribe meaning to observed behavior either in reality or in films like *Alien*, I demonstrated that both biological and cultural ToM is unavoidable for individuals. Yet ToM is generally targeted as an idea solely belonging to evolutionary discourse, which is assumed to reduce human experiences to biologically fixed conditions. By introducing ‘evolution’ into the methodology, a conceptual framework is produced, which commits all analysis to historicization. To showcase this biological and cultural synthesis, Chapters Two and Three discuss how ToM operates as both hardwired cognition and conditioned process. Ash and Ripley are used as beacons for these chapters, because they interestingly correspond with programmed versus nurtured minds and develop both sides of the notorious biological/cultural duality. Borrowing Ash’s description of the alien in one scene, this duality is “an interesting combination of elements, making him a tough little son of a bitch.” Though spoken to illustrate the brutal tenacity of Kane’s alien facehugger, this last remark, “tough son of a bitch,” certainly describes Ash’s and Ripley’s characters, since they, too, prove determined in their plans to survive and adapt well to their social environment with the combination of their biological and cultural ToMs.

Ash’s and Ripley’s actions also complicate other binary categories of the film, including masculine/feminine and human/android, as spectators observe them carry out behavior that contradicts outward identities. As noted in Chapters Two and Three, Ash is

effeminately characterized by his compassionate dealings with Kane, while Ripley appears aggressive and inhuman. This is significant to spectators' experience with the film, since it challenges their ToM and prods them to renegotiate cultural binaries. *Alien* is not solely unsettling because of the threats concealed throughout the film's narrative; it also invokes ideas that seem culturally uncategorizable for spectators, because they violate dominant conceptual constructions. However, the film does not substitute one binary part for the other between Ash and Ripley; it reminds spectators how these two characters engender both sides of such ideological oppositions.

For instance, prior to the events involving Ash's violent struggle with Ripley, spectators observe two close-ups of the characters exchanging penetrating stares that anticipate a fight. In one shot, the camera is fixed on Ripley and reveals a sudden nosebleed (brought on by hysteria) emerging from her face. Within seconds, this is trailed by a full-framed shot of Ash's face, as a trickle of milky solution falls from his forehead. The scene captures an explosive moment in more ways than the angry hollers and spurting decapitated head that follow it. In a straightforward manner, Ripley's nosebleed suggests menstrual blood while Ash's sweat is evocative of pre-seminal fluid. These images correspond with feminine and masculine attributes, but the shot/reverse shot that connects Ash and Ripley also suggest they never remain within the confines of a binary system. The blood and synthetic milk solution also play with concepts of organic versus artificial liquids. By showing how horror challenges and transforms the categories of spectators' known worlds, *Alien* provides constant vacillation for spectators' expectations of characters. Moreover, while the vacillation and instability of cultural constructions, like humanness or gender, may be sources of displeasure, *Alien's* ever-developing flow of

anticipation, interpretation, and transformation supplies its viewers with enjoyment by exercising their ToMs and pointing out both its and culture's changeability.

Spectatorial pleasure is further advanced if one reconsiders the film's alien as something more than a terrifying beast. One effort of my study has highlighted the ostensible differences between Ash and Ripley and then revealed how these differences become complicated for the spectator. An unexpected figure of posthumanism that also straddles these binary differences is the alien creature; after all, it is a biological entity that quickly adapts to its environment, is both natural and synthetic, and appears genderless. Throughout the series, a great deal of the alien's attributes and life cycle are explained, particularly that it acquires many of the physical traits of the host from which it is delivered, thus giving the creature the ability adapt to its host's surroundings. Critic Kristin Thompson notes that the vessel (facehugger) through which the alien gets deposited into its host is "clearly a grotesque amalgam of caricatural female and male human genitalia" and concludes that it is "presented as equally male and female" (300). Its eruption through Kane's male body further challenges these categories. In this way, the alien is a posthuman figure moving beyond traditional methods of identification and blurring cultural constructions. Notably, *Nostramo's* entire crew dies at the hands of the alien except for the only other posthuman agents of the film, Ash and Ripley. Their posthumanity seems to exclude them from the same end their peers meet, because the rest of the crew follows dominant ideological constructions, appearing unwaveringly masculine or feminine and always human. As the rest of the series progresses, the alien becomes predator and prey in a way that is analagous to spectators' minds. Viewers are

subject to *Alien*'s narrative and the new rules it puts forth, but they are simultaneously empowered when assembling the film's information through the domains of their ToM.

Ultimately, my argument comments on the entanglements that horror cinema regularly presents through unfamiliar characters that go past rigid cultural methods of classification. By noting the posthuman properties of *Alien*'s characters, Ash and Ripley, spectators can find that they, too, renegotiate dualistic ways of thinking and transform permanently situated information and conditions into a stream of ever-developing and ever-changing knowledge. Accordingly, *Alien* moves spectators into the posthuman register, since the encounter with and interpretation of the film's posthuman characters are contained within a genre made up of unstable categories. *Alien*'s achievement is in its explicit demonstration of blurred binaries that emphasize the flexibility of posthuman modes of identification and even the fluidity of ToM itself. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston add, "pleasure derives from spectacular enactments of the posthuman" rather than through traditional "mechanisms of identification" (221), which reaffirms how horror can be enjoyable without its adherence to standard cultural constructions. Since the biologically driven and culturally steered ToM is a process continually employing viewers' experiences, pleasure in the horror film is not secluded to the two hours of watching a narrative. Rather it stimulates spectators' minds to continue intensely reading and developing their ToM and potentially transforms how viewers read their worlds outside the film. The fun of fear appears self-contradictory at first, yet stems from a reality in which spectators in films like *Alien* observe, think, and use their thoughts and interpretations not just to interact with their cinematic and real environments, but also to challenge, transform, and adapt to them.



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