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Monsters, Marines, and Feminism in the 1980s: A Look at Ellen Ripley from *Aliens*

When the science-fiction movie *Aliens* was released in July 1986, it was a blockbuster hit, reaping in “huge profits” (Brown 52). The movie told the story of Ellen Ripley, who was sent as an advisor on a rescue mission with a group of marines to an alien planet, where they come into contact with a deadly alien species. The enormous and long-lasting popularity enjoyed by *Aliens* stemmed not only from the action-packed storyline and state-of-the-art special effects, but also largely due to the heroic portrayal of Ripley’s character. In fact, Ripley is listed as one of the American Film Institute’s 100 Greatest Heroes & Villains (“AFI’s 100 Years...100 Heroes & Villains”). The inclusion of Ripley on this list is remarkable, since she is one of only eight female heroes of the 100 listed, which is a testament to her character being a fan favorite, regardless of gender. The portrayal of Ellen Ripley in the science fiction movie *Aliens* (Cameron) was a watershed in the filmmaking industry because it reflected the cultural changes brought about by an increasing number of women entering the workforce. The fact that the lead action hero of *Aliens* was cast as a woman is remarkable in itself, and is a reflection of the fact that the movie was released in a time period when women were increasingly working in non-traditional occupations. In addition, the treatment Ripley experiences in the film mirrors the challenges many women faces upon entering the workforce in record numbers in the 1980s.

Ripley’s depiction in *Aliens* therefore represents an important shift in film and media when it comes to women, and assumes greater importance than usual because of the impact it had on breaking through gender-based action genre conventions. She is characterized as an independent, adaptive, and cautious person who is courageous as well as strong, in her own way.

However, instead of being a carbon copy of other masculinized action heroes, her character is allowed to feel emotions and even develops a maternal link to an orphaned girl, Newt. In fact, it's those maternal instincts that she holds for Newt that ends up being her greatest strength, especially in the face of the Alien Mother, her direct counterpart as a character. Ripley's character was also made more likable and palatable to audiences due to her demonstrations throughout the film of traditional maternal love. Ripley's characterization not only counters the gender-coding of women as weak, emotional, and always in need of help, but also doesn't conform to society's idea of masculinity and what it means to be 'strong', which parallels the growing wave of feminism in western, industrialized countries at the time.

Production companies in Hollywood—as well as the vast majority of media during this frame—had long adhered to the rigid, gender-specific heroic depictions in cinema. Action movies, which grew in popularity during the early 1980s and into the 1990s, almost invariably depicted the lead protagonist as an stoic and über-masculine character, best typified by Sylvester Stallone (*Rocky*, *Rambo*, *Cobra*) and Arnold Schwarzenegger (*Conan*, *Commando*, *Predator*). Conversely, this genre of movies habitually relegating women to the role of “damsel in distress” or “love interest” which the anti-hero dutifully rescues from the clutches of the villain; the women regularly demonstrated helplessness in the face of danger. Rarely were the women in these films able to defend themselves, much less provided leadership and assistance to others in need. According to writer Jeffrey Brown, in 1980s action films, the trademark lead was hyper-masculinized, “while the women are present only to be rescued or to confirm the heterosexuality of the hero” (52). This is not surprising, considering the screenplays were written by mostly male writers. By the 1980s, screenwriting was “male dominated but also more likely to reward

those individuals who expressed masculine sensibilities in popular genres like action- adventure and science fiction” (Watkins & Emerson 156).

There were few other workplaces which exemplified the challenges facing women in the workforce more than in the Hollywood film industry in the 1980s. Although women were benefitting from more opportunities than ever before during the 1980s, it was also an era where the filmmaking industry overwhelmingly depicted regressive gender roles and stereotypes in its productions. The strong, tough, and ultra-masculinized male leads, and the submissive, helpless, and feminized characters became a staple of many Hollywood blockbuster movies during the 80’s. *Aliens* proved to be very different in this regard; the fact that a woman was the main hero of an action-packed movie, was new for the time. Ripley’s characterization counters the gender-coding of women as weak, emotional, and forever in need of help from a man, but also helps to redefine film audience’s idea of heroism and what it means to be strong and brave.

Aliens was important not only because it broke through gender-based action genre conventions, but because it was a commercially successful film while breaking those barriers. Its commercial success was due at least in part to the fact that audience members were more inclined to like Ripley as a result of a “growing acceptance of nontraditional roles for women” (Brown 52). This shift in gender roles occurred during the relatively progressive era of the 1980s, which saw an unprecedented influx of women into the workforce. By 1985, women’s “participation in the work force of women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four soared from 15 to 71 percent” (Guilder). Many of these women now occupied what had once been mainly male-dominated spheres, such as professional jobs, increasing from 44 to 49 percent, and management positions, increasing from 20 to 36 percent (Guilder).

Nonetheless, although there was a growth in the number and variety of jobs for women, there were still plenty of fields dominated by men, and women faced unique challenges as relatively new members of this workforce. Despite the progress being made in breaking established gender roles at the time, many women still suffered a disparity in wages and sexual harassment in what was still a male-dominated work culture (Guilder). Ripley's experiences in the film parallel how women were still were willing occupy a workplace that was isolating to them, even though they were facing confronting difficulties working in a male-dominated, group-oriented culture (Watkins & Emerson 153).

For example, at the start of the movie, Ripley is rescued from a longer period of "hyper-sleep" by the Weyland-Yutani Corporation 57 years after the events of the first film. Upon awakening, she is introduced to new technology, people, and culture. She does not feel that she belongs, and "is clearly an alien in and alienated from her own world" (Bick 345). The corporate culture in particular is strange to her, as it appears to be focused solely on the financial loss of the spaceship *Nostromo*, treating its late crew members as if they were mere collateral rather than human beings. This type of cruel, unsympathetic and profit-centered society parallels the workplace women entered into in masse in the late 1980s. She has to 'battle' her way through this system that's actively fighting against her and her beliefs, just like how the committee counteracts her. Ripley represents this working woman, who must deftly navigate her way throughout to this new world and culture.

This is especially noteworthy with the marines, who are introduced into the story soon after Ripley is asked to help with the situation with the colony. They are portrayed in a way that embodies the hyper masculine, action oriented nature of this world. They aren't necessarily amoral or business-oriented like the Weyland Corporation itself, but their interactions with

Ripley prove just how masculinized they are. In the locker room scene, for example, there's talk between the marines and they even tease Private Vasquez about being like a man, one of the few female marines in the group. The marines, including Vasquez, demonstrate their physical strength by showing their muscles and doing pull ups on the bars. The fact that they're associated with strength and manliness, especially under the guise of being marines, parallels the typical tropes of action movies during the 1980s. This also goes for the scene where they are introduced to Ripley. They clearly show just how little they respect her and her advice on the matter when it comes to going to the colony. They're cocky and full of themselves, and several of them talk or ignore Ripley when she's trying to prove her point on just how dangerous this situation is with the xenomorphs. This scene is also reminiscent of the one with the Weyland Corporation and the committee, as they underestimate Ripley's experiences and doubt her story at every turn. In this case, the stereotypical, masculine depiction of the marines is suggestive of the gendered roles of men in media, especially in the action adventure genre, as well as the male-dominated workplace at that time. They overlook Ripley's cautiousness in favor for action, glory, and just in overall cockiness, which in part is due to their disregard for anything they consider 'weak' (in this case, their assigned 'advisor', Ripley, being a non-marine and telling them how to do their jobs, which they treat as a joke more than anything else).

In addition, the character of Vasquez adds another depth to this issue as well. Despite the fact she's female, she still conforms to the marines mindset of having to be masculine and strong in order to be taken seriously. She's one of the characters who questions Ripley during the scene where Ripley has to debrief them. Although one might expect Vasquez, another woman, to understand her, she acts like the rest of the men and even treats Ripley the same way they do. Again, this parallels with women in the workplace, as some women felt as if they had to conform

into this type of culture to be involved, but at the cost of bringing other women down in the process. Vasquez, along with the other marines, ends up disregarding Ripley's singularly empathetic cautiousness and intelligence, part in due to group conformity and their mindset.

Colonial Marine Lieutenant Gorman, on the other hand, is also a direct juxtaposition to the marines. Like Ripley, he's been assigned to lead this group against the alien threat on the colony, however, based on his interactions with the crew, it's shown he's had little to no real experience on the battle. This is especially noteworthy during the scene when they're first entering the planet's atmosphere, and one of the characters asks how many flights he's been on, and he says 36 simulated ones, but only 2 real battles, including the one he's currently on. The marines swiftly tease this moment with him and proceed to emasculate him, which rectifies the rest of their interactions with the Lieutenant. His character, in this case, is feminized as being characteristically weak, inexperienced, and controlled by emotions. He tries to live up to this stereotype of a strong, capable leader, by taking command over the mission like he's supposed to, but he doesn't earn the respect of the marines in any way. That's why his incompetence during the marines first encounter with the xenomorph horde is significant. He tries to call them back as soon as he sees them outnumbered and outflanked, but the intercom is broken. He wants to live up to being their leader, but once he faces a real obstacle like this, he becomes paralyzed with fear, at the cost of the lives of his fellow men. Ripley, in this instance, is shown to be more of a leader as she quickly takes control, against the Lieutenant's command, and ends up rescuing the survivors. Her instincts and adaptive nature prove just how capable she is at being a leader, just like any other man.

Although the Lieutenant's character is chastised by the marines, his character is an example that not all men have to fit into the mold of being strong, stoic and 'badass'. He simply

isn't up to par with the position, but because of this society, which aligns masculinity with strength, certain gender roles are placed onto him and he feels the need to live up to those expectations (whether or not they're actually true to his own character). Ripley, on the other hand, perfectly fits this mold of being a true leader. However, both due to her position as a civilian, she isn't considered as a possible leader for this team. This parallels how women in the 1980s had the same skills and traits positively associated with their male-counterparts, but were usually ignored or replaced with men who were either competent or, just like the Lieutenant, simply didn't properly fill the job assigned to them. This goes for the film industry as well, as most female characters were relegated to minor roles in comparison to male heroes. Ripley, in this instances, has to prove herself to the marines by taking command when no one else will, which, through hard work and determination, she's able to achieve and use to her advantage to help get the marines, and Newt, off the planet.

In addition to the film's depiction of Ripley as independent, courageous, and strong, she was made more likable to audiences due to her exhibition of maternal love. In the course of her mission with the marines, Ripley develops a maternal bond with an orphaned girl, Newt. Indeed, it is Ripley's acting out these maternal instincts which leads to her greatest demonstration of strength and courage, and which is her tête-à-tête with the Alien Mother late in the film.

While Sigourney Weaver's portrayal challenged gender-specific expectations to an extent, the film made Ripley's character more palatable to moviegoers by allowing her to retain what is considered a most distinct feminine trait—maternal instinct. As articulated by Jeffrey Brown, “due to the homophobic nature of most mainstream audiences,” the heterosexuality of the action lead is established by a “fierce maternal instinct” (62). In this way, Ripley's popularity may be at least partially due to the fact that she retained the traditional feminine

attribute of motherly love; she was an assertive and adaptable woman, yet still was tied to her feminine identity.

The portrayal of the lead character—as well as the plotline of the movie itself—represented the positive and humane aspects of women’s increasing control over their reproductive health in western culture in the 1980s. Women’s increased ability to plan their pregnancies and childbirth broadened their career options, and allowed them to take on more non-traditional gender roles in the workplace, the family, and society. Ripley's character reflects this the sea change, and it even utilizes it as a plot device by pitting the alien mother— who dedicates herself to uncontrolled and unthinking mass reproduction of baby aliens—against Ripley’s more measured approach by devoting herself to her single adoptive child. Yunis and Ostrander point out that for the mother alien, “reproduction, and the savage nurturance and protection of her offspring, are her sole functions. The Mother Alien is a projection of the overpopulation, speciesism, and parasitic imperialism which have sent the Company into space in the first place” (70).

The dichotomy between these two characters underscores the changing cultural landscape most women in the United States and other western, industrialized countries were facing during the time the film was produced in 1986. As Yunis and Ostrander argue, “clearly the social role of the mother is being reconstructed in this film; there is an intentional vilification of mother as mere reproducer and a celebration of mother as an independent and courageous defender of the already living” (73). In pitting the two mothers against one another, the film demonstrates the perils of uncontrolled, animalistic reproduction. For example, in the scene where Ripley rescues Newt and confronts the mother alien, the villain is shown to be capable of doing little else but producing her offspring in a confined space. The mother alien is physically adhered to her

surroundings as she lays egg after egg. In a very real way, the alien mother is trapped by her role as a reproductive vessel, and is vulnerable to Ripley's and her flamethrower due to the alien's lack of mobility.

Conversely, Ripley is highly mobile and adaptive throughout the film, by having to care for and protect a single child. Ripley's character—just like a growing number of women in 1986—were no longer bound to having one child after another. What is more, when Ripley confronts the mother alien in the final scene, the film shows that although the alien is larger and stronger, it is Ripley's adaptability and her ability to physically separate from her child in the spaceship bay which allows her to save the girl. By rendering the victory of the heroine over the alien mother, the filmmaker sends the message that the conscientious regulation of offspring enables a woman to be a more powerful and adaptive mother. It is Ripley's *choice* to be a mother which gives her the advantage over the alien mother.

The movie *Aliens* was a defining moment in the casting of a lead character of an action movie, since the main character broke the mold of the hyper-masculine male action lead. She is a counter-example to what movie-goers and the film industry considered 'true strength' to be, which at the time was considered were the marines, who filled the role of being hyper-violent and physically strong. However, it was both her maternal instinct as well as her intelligence that helped her prevail over the marines, as her urge to go fight the alien Mother was made out of her selflessness and emotional tie with Newt rather than out of bloodlust. While Ripley's portrayal was groundbreaking, the characterization was made more palatable to moviegoers by exhibiting the traditional and gender-specific trait of maternal love. In addition, by pitting Ripley against the alien mother, the film demonstrated the advantages of women's ability to control their reproduction over unrestrained reproduction. In the end, her active and strong-willed behavior

(as well as her maternal instincts) directly paralleled the cultural and economic changes facing women during that era; in particular, she reflected both the gains women enjoyed and the challenges they faced as they entered the workforce in record numbers.

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