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HOW TO READ ALIENS - Genre, Spectacle and Cthtonian Horror in the Alien Films

Alien, depicting the struggle between the crew and the destructive monster on a freight ship speeding in space, has generally been regarded as an abundantly excessive but old-fashioned monster movie or a splatter film boasting of visual tricks. Consequently, the critical focus has been either on the generic history or special make-up effects.

Critics have recurrently reminded of the "thinness" or "superficiality" of the film's narrative. Sometimes this notion has, however, incited allegorical readings, with various sociological, psychological and feminist layers of meaning. When criticism has bothered to look under surface, it has ignored the issues of genre and special effects altogether. Seldom have pleasurable surface and meaningful depth encountered.

In the present paper I have tried to accommodate these various approaches. Rather than exclusive, my perspective is inclusive. Generic background, surface of the spectacle and profound ideological levels are not mutually exclusive layers, but contexts suggested by certain cinematic discourses which, if put in an interactive relation, yield a different view of the film, richer than before.

Alien intertwines iconographic and narrative features of science fiction and horror genres inside its visual and technological spectacle in such a manner that a socio-critical interpretation becomes possible. In these interpretations mythical, feminist and psychoanalytic concepts are often resorted to. Basically, however, both the generic position and the social aspects of Alien are due to - and not in spite of - the audiovisual outlook of the film. The design of the film is not only meaningless gimmickry of Ridley Scott, an ex-commercials director, and R.H. Giger, a now popular surrealist artist, but, rather, the key to its meaning.

At first the present paper surveys Barbara Creed's feminist-psychoanalytic reading of Alien and, in addition,

some texts dealing with feminism and mythology which can be regarded as historically parallel texts with Creed's views. After this some generic issues structuring the interpretations of the three Alien films are considered, specifically the ideological difference between science fiction and horror. Finally the films are discussed in terms of "surface" and spectacle in the light of the issues raised by the previous chapters.

Translated by Veijo Hietala

Juhana Stedt

On the affects of *Videodrome*

When discussing David Cronenberg's films Steven Shaviro argues that our western culture is very Cartesian in its attempts to keep thought separate from flesh. He quotes Foucault who suggests that we continue "to elaborate the strange idea that there exists something other than bodies, organs, [--], sensations and pleasures; something else and something more, with intrinsic properties and laws of its own". Shaviro thinks that Cronenberg's films represent the world without this transcendental "something else" by showing the flesh in its pure materiality.

In the immanent world of *Videodrome* there is no sexual or political "normality". Everyday life is made of painful sensations, sexual "perversions" and violent power mechanisms. There is nothing but actual affections of the flesh. The power of "something else" affects directly Max Renn by causing brain tumors and hallucinations. Oppositions between mind and body collapse, the power of affection is real and immanent. There are only relations, actual causes and effects, desire and will to power. Shaviro argues that *Videodrome* represents these relations in a manner that is not compatible with the transcendental idea of dualism.

I agree with Shaviro's point that *Videodrome* represents an immanent world. But in a strange retreat to a kind of a dualism Shaviro argues that *Videodrome* represents some sort of "ecstasy of abjection". I think that his formulations, although at the level of

immanence, are still external to the things in the world of *Videodrome*.

I'm interested in the following question: how does *Videodrome* work on the plane of immanence? To answer this question I have to introduce a few ethological concepts which help to address the question of immanence. Ethology is originally a branch of biology whose field is the composition of the affects of nature. In other words ethology tries to answer the Spinozian question: what a body can do? Besides the concept of *affect*, we need two concepts to show how these affects are distributed at the level of immanence. These concepts are *longitude* and *latitude*.

In Spinozian terms every thing or object (e.g film *Videodrome*) is an individual assemblage of affects, capacities to influence and to be influenced. In a particular thing or object these affects can be assumed to be related in two different ways, by the thing's longitude and latitude. Longitude is the relation of the things' affects as thought in terms of speed and slowness, motion and rest. By this concept it is possible to define the extension of a thing, how far it reaches and how many things it can influence. Latitude is the intensity of a thing, the power by which it affects the things it reaches. For example the beginning of *Videodrome* is "easy" to follow, it reaches many spectators, it's longitude is powerful but at the same time it is not very intensive, or scary. But all this changes as the film proceeds. It becomes strange (longitude diminishes) and difficult but at the same time it's latitude grows stronger: it affects more intensely.

When surveyed in terms of immanence it can be argued that *Videodrome* represents Max as a part of the videotext and in doing so it shows how the dyadic relation between Max and technology has become a monadic relation 'Max is technology'. Max is reduced to an automaton, he cannot but react to the forces that are inserted into him in the form of video cassettes. He cannot reflect on his own behavior, he cannot act. He is totally immersed in the world of passive sadness. Where Shaviro sees an "ecstasy of abjection" I detect only the concrete effect of passivity: death.