

Science Fiction or Science Fantasy?

The gendered portrayal of aliens and the discourse of dominance in outer space politics

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Jill: Science fiction movies about outer space frequently portray aliens as women, from the grotesque and oozing female in the *Alien* series, to the sexualized and seductive beauties in *Mars Attacks!* and *The Faculty* to name just a few examples. This paper explores how and why aliens are portrayed as women in science fiction movies, and with what consequences. We argue that doing so allows for the transfer of meaning: women as other, and alien as other. We trace not only where aliens are portrayed as women in science fiction, but also how the gendered discourse is carried through, as these aliens use their mysterious and suspicious powers to seduce “hu-mans”, before attempting (how dare they!) to reverse the gender dynamic through dominating these mere earthlings. Humans inevitably return to destroy the aliens and establish normal (patriarchal) order. We argue that the significance of this process is not simply an annoying dynamic of a male-dominated entertainment genre, but that it is part of the dialectical process for establishing meaning about outer space for wider world politics; and how that meaning is also reconstitutive of gender dynamics on earth. As such, the gendered discourse for outer space not only represents “what if”, but poses a greater chance of manifesting into what “may become”.

Alien-females and the “hu-man”

Aliens have frequently been portrayed as women in science fiction movies, and most readers will already be familiar with some examples. Often the alien-females are beautiful and sexual, such as in “Cat Women on the Moon” (1953), wherein earth astronauts discover the moon to be occupied by eight scantily clad alien-women. The attractive, seemingly innocent, young, and blond “Maybeth Louise Hutchinson” in *The Faculty* (1998) is eventually discovered to be The Queen of an alien colony that is invading earth. In the end of the movie she appears naked before converting into her true, monstrous and alien form. In the comedy spoof *Mars Attacks!* (1996) the invading aliens assume various forms, including that of large-breasted women, to manipulate humanity in its attempt to take over the Earth.

On the other hand, is the *Alien* series where the queen alien is portrayed not as beautiful, but horrific in her femininity. H. R. Griger, the original designer of the alien has acknowledged his intent to create the alien as a patriarchal conception the “monstrous feminine”¹: “She is there in the text’s scenarios of the primal scene of birth and death; she is there in the many guises as the treacherous mother, the oral sadistic mother, the mother as the primordial abyss; and she is there in the film’s images of blood, of the all-devouring vagina, the toothed vagina; the vagina as Pandora’s box; and finally she is

¹ Creed, Barbara. “Alien and the Monstrous Feminine.” In Kuhn, *Alien Zone*, p. 128.

there in the chameleon figure of the alien, the monster as fetish object of and for the mother.”²

These two approaches to portraying aliens as female both serve the purpose of transferring meaning to outer space and aliens: by making the aliens female, they are already made into the other. They are the object against which hu-manity must suddenly define itself. In this way, it rings true of what Simon de Beauvoir argued about defining women – coincidentally at the same time as the science fiction genre began to fill movie theatres and television sets:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and no he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the other.³

In making the aliens in science fiction female, they are also being made the other. It is noteworthy that this “hu-manity” is often patriarchal and western, liberal and individualistic, and it is against these presumptions that the aliens dare to assert themselves.

The female ‘other’ aliens are also imbued with the significance of femininity as expressed best by eco-feminism—they are natural and unknown, and in that sense to be feared.⁴ They have a disquieting knowledge about the universe and life that is threatening to hu-manity. While humans have come to rely on technology and a stable international (i.e., Western) system, the aliens threaten to disrupt this balance in their mysterious and unknown ontological status, which is disturbingly close to nature.⁵

The gendered portrayal of aliens extends merely beyond appearance, but can be seen further in the behavior of the aliens. The beautiful aliens manipulate and seduce men with the underlying subversive goals (usually dominance of their bodies, and of the body-politic—Earth). For example, in *Mars Attacks* an alien dons the corporeal body of a large-busted female in order to bypass security and enter the White House. In so doing, humanity is forgiven for its initial failings in countering alien attacks. Hu-mans initially fail to deter alien invasions due to their weakness, but it is a weakness to female seduction, which can be forgiven. They are weak, but they are also men, and who can blame a man for falling for the evil temptations of a beautiful female? This is related to the idea that women are responsible for their own sexuality, and that of men too. Like Adam and an alien-Eve, a man cannot be held responsible for his vulnerability to female seduction.

² Quoted in Mair, Jan 2002. “Rewriting the ‘American Dream’: Postmodernism and Otherness in *Independence Day*.” In *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction Cinema*. Eds. Ziauddin Sardar and Sean Cubitt. Pluto Press: London.

³ Simon de Beauvoir 1949. *The Second Sex*.

⁴ See for example Maria Miles & Vandana Shiva 1993. *Ecofeminism*. Melbourne: Spinifex.

⁵ This is a point that is explored in more detail in the next section of the paper.

Inevitably, the alien-female eventually reveals her true intentions of dominance. In *Cat Women on the Moon* the aliens are actually interested in overtaking the astronauts' ship. In *Mars Attacks!* the aliens desire to destroy humanity for the sheer fun of it. In *Species*, (with the tag line "Men cannot resist her. Mankind may not survive her"), Sil, the beautiful, yet speechless, alien aims to destroy mankind by seducing men and breeding.

In another science fiction cliché, the aliens also desire to overtake the human corporeal body, and morph it to their evil purposes, taking away its individuality and making it part of the alien project. Akin to Luce Irigaray's writing on the placenta, the aliens have a sense of single-being that flies in the face of Western individualism.⁶ Perhaps there is no greater example of this than *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* where human beings are replaced by emotionless alien-grown pod-people.⁷

The taking over of the human body is not only an affront to Western individualism, but also a manner of over-turning gender dynamics (and hence power dynamics) and feminizing men by making them the capsules of alien offspring. This is most explicitly demonstrated in the first *Alien* movie when a member of the crew falls victim to an alien that attaches itself to the man's face. The alien has inserted a phallic proboscis into the man's throat, in essence raping him. The alien eventually detaches itself, but after an incubation period, the offspring bursts through the man's chest in an analogous bloody and visceral child birth. In *The Faculty*, the alien-female's means of dominance is in delivering worms into human bodies, which then pervade the system and convert the victim.

Thus the alien-females have dared to reverse the gender dynamic and rape humans. Humans are turned into incubators and reproducers—which is, in a symbolic sense, turning them into women. Once the deception is realized, humanity must retaliate, turning to individuals and technology for their salvation. The aliens (and their eggs, or worms, or means of reproduction) are destroyed and the (gendered) order restored. (White) man's burden has been fulfilled.

What does international feminist scholarship say about mere Earthlings?

The above gives a brief outline of how aliens are portrayed as women in science fiction. The next two sections address the question of why, and why this matters? A short answer to why aliens are portrayed as women is because science fiction is traditionally a genre written by men, for male consumption. Hence the gratuitous casting of beautiful women in skimpy costumes is perhaps not surprising. But, as introduced above, it also allows

⁶ Lucy Irigaray 1993. *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*. London: Routledge. This point is also interestingly raised by Wertheim 2002 in her analysis of the Borg in *Star Trek: First Contact*. In *Aliens R Us: the Other in Science Fiction Cinema*. Eds. Ziauddin Sardar and Sean Cubitt. London: Pluto Press.

⁷ A plot so successful that the 1956 movie has been selected for preservation by the US National Film Registry and was remade in 1978 (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), 1993 (*Body Snatchers*) and there is another remake (or at least *homage*) planned for a 2007 release (*The Invasion*).

plotlines to tie into pre-existing discourses and to transfer meanings about the realm of outer space, and also the role of women in politics.

This next section seeks to offer a brief explanation – or speculation – as to what international feminist scholarship might have to say about the portrayal of women in outer space. In particular, the section focuses on the work of Cynthia Enloe, whose ‘feminist curiosity’ has lead her to ask a series of interesting questions about women in her work. In seeking answers, she makes engaging assertions which are of particular importance for a discussion of women in space.⁸

1. Many of the things we assume to be natural, inevitable, unavoidable and predetermined – aren’t.
2. We can learn new things, or gain insight, when we pay attention to women.

The first point is an attack on the description of something as “natural” and the baggage that goes with it. Enloe provides a good summary of this argument in the introduction to her collection of essays, *The Curious Feminist*:

Take, for instance, the loaded adjective, “natural”. If one takes for granted that something is “natural” – generals being male, garment workers being female – it saves mental energy. After all, what is deemed natural hasn’t been self-consciously created. No decisions have to be made. The result: we can imagine that there is nothing we need to investigate.⁹

In other words, to call or assume something is natural is to make an assumption that it is the way things are supposed to be – leading to the following assumptions that 1) the ‘something’ in question has not been constructed or made and 2) that it cannot be changed or that it is inevitable. Again, in Enloe’s words:

The presumption that something that gives shape to how we live with one another is inevitable, a ‘given’, is hard to dislodge. It seems easier to imagine that something oozes up from an indeterminate past, that it has never been deliberately concocted, does not need to be maintains, that it’s just there.¹⁰

Enloe then turns this questioning to the ideas of masculinity and femininity. Why is it that some jobs, values and virtues are associated with men and others associated with women? Why is it that different roles have been assigned to men and women and what are the implications of these gendered divisions?

⁸ Although it may be questionable as to how Enloe would feel about her work being used to examine questions relating to outer space. In an essay titled ‘The Surprised Feminist’ she indicates that “Friends have to bribe me to go with them to see sci-fi movies.” Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*, Berkley: University of California Press, 2004.

⁹ Enloe, *The Curious Feminist*, p. 1.

¹⁰ Cynthia Enloe, *Banana’s Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Berkley: University of California Press, 2000. p. 3.

Conventionally, both masculinity and femininity have been treated as 'natural' not created. Today, however, there is mounting evidence that they are packages of expectations that have been created through specific decisions by specific people. We are also coming to realize that the traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity have been surprisingly hard to perpetuate: it has required the daily exercise of power – domestic power, national power, and as we will see, international power.¹¹

The roles that we have assigned or assumed are therefore not natural, but have been put in place by someone. And because these constructions are not natural, they must be maintained and reinforced once they are put into place.

Enloe takes these questions and assertions to examine how a gendered division of labour supports military bases, tourism, diplomacy and factories around the world. And this brings us to a second argument that Enloe puts forward which will be useful for the investigation of this paper: that by making women the center of our investigation that we will receive a very different, yet equally important view of international politics.

... if we listened to women more carefully – to those trying to break out of the strait-jacket of conventional femininity *and* those who find security and satisfaction in those very conventions – and if we made concepts such as 'wife', 'mother', 'sexy broad' central to our investigations, we might find that... international politics generally looked different. It's not that we would abandon our curiosity about arms dealers, presidents' men and concepts such as 'covert operations'. Rather, we would no longer find them sufficient to understand how the international political system works.¹²

Such a view of international politics would not only provide different answers than what we typically discuss or generate, but it will also help us to ask different questions about the way the world works. Asking women about how they feel about traveling, nuclear weapons, imported flowers from Africa may help to reveal new perspectives about the international state system. Looking at women's role in a clothing factory in Asia raises new issues as to how the women got there and who consumes the products they make.

Enloe's arguments suggest that a perspective which makes women the center of our investigations reveals that their jobs and the roles that they are assigned are not natural. Rather, constructing a pool of female cheap female labour to attract foreign investment so that a country may pay off its national debts, or a guerrilla movement's dependency on women's domestic and wage-earning labour to maintain their struggle, requires ideas about the role of women in communities, national and international society. These ideas need to be reproduced and enforced by local, national and international power. But what about *intergalactic* power?

¹¹ Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, p. 3.

¹² Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, p. 11.

Science Fiction and the Art of the (Im)Possible

A central question in Enloe's work is "What if?" As she argues, "... if the treeless landscape or all-women's typing pool can be shown to be the result of someone's decision and has to be perpetuated, then it is possible to imagine alternatives. 'What if...?' can be a radical question."¹³ And it is here that a link between international feminist scholarship and science fiction can be made.

A feminist international scholarship, such as the one described by Enloe, suggests that it is important to re-examine and deconstruct what has been described as natural. Additionally, we are given a completely new perspective if scholars are more willing to ask "What if" – or whether 'it' really has to be that way. The key is questioning and imagining. Why are things the way they are? And could they be different? What could they be like in the future?

In this way, Enloe's vision of international feminist politics reflects an often stated goal of science fiction: to re-imagine ourselves and the world we live in; in the future, in other worlds, in outer space. Science fiction has been, and continues to be for millions around the world, the way that we can project our dreams and visions – or our worst nightmares – of the future. It is how authors, television and movie producers, actors, costume designers and artists can offer us a vision of how things might be, whether that vision is inspiring or terrifying.

In other words, science fiction is the realm of "What if?" and it explores the potential of variation. And it is this which attracts its legions of fans who desire to examine a world different from our own – but with characters that we can understand and relate to. We obtain a feel for how the worlds of science fiction operate through the experiences of our protagonists. The audience relates to the worlds presented because individuals are able to project their own lives, views and opinions on what science fiction presents them. This is, of course, a necessity: a world to which no reader or viewer could understand or relate to would probably not have its vision or message understood.

Science fiction then says about as much about our own world as it does the future. We understand the forces that drive the Rebellion in Star Wars. We feel the dire threat posed to Ripley and her crew in Alien. We understand E.T.'s longing to return home. Without relating these situations to our own world, feelings, experiences and emotions, much of the meaning of science fiction would be lost.

It is therefore interesting, if not understandable, that the popularity of science fiction seems to be on the increase as space has become increasingly less romantic than what it was during the late 19th and most of the 20th Centuries. Alien life forms are now presented to us in science journals as long-dead microbes on a rock in Antarctica. Rather than intelligent life, we are more likely to find bacteria in the former seas of Mars than anything resembling Marvin the Martian. The appeal of fiction which maintains the idea

¹³ Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, p. 3.

of drama and a human (or humanoid) dimension to outer space is, perhaps, justifiably appealing.¹⁴

Where no (wo)man has gone before?

Given this potential for imagining the future, taking the problems and issues of today's world and putting them in another time and place, the female science fiction fan might be forgiven for being somewhat lackluster about that which has been generated; that the overall presentation of outer space has traditionally been and typically remains represented as highly gendered. This does not imply that there has been an absence of women in science fiction – far from it. However, the roles that men and women are assigned are usually different and reinforce ideas of a gendered society even in the most fantastical futures.

Although present on spaceships and planets, women play the role of wife, mother and comforter. They are also often the medical and support personnel. Men are assigned the role of captains, explorers and fighters.

When 'What if?' becomes 'What is'

The final section argues that the gendered portrayal of the future in outer space is a danger not only for perpetually annoying female movie-goers, but because it is part of the pre-construction (and dialectical reconstruction) of understanding and meaning of outer space politics. Furthermore, these preconceptions reinforce gender dynamics in traditional politics. Thus the gendered dynamics of politics are reinforced and reconstituted in a dialectic that reconstructs and reinforces patriarchy through intertextuality.

Science fiction serves to embed in wider society perceptions about outer space politics. In the words of Ziauddin Sardar, it is the fiction of mortgaged futures, and the stories portrayed make it harder to imagine other futures (2002, 1). For decades the portrayal of aliens as the dangerous other helps to reinforce movements for dominance in outer space. The US programme of “space command” (ref) displays how America sees outer space as a dangerous region in need of conquering. Analogies of outer space as the “Final Frontier” (ref Star Trek) and Sputnik as a “space Pearl Harbor” (ref NASA) recreates imperialist and expansionist discourses.

These conceptualizations of space explorations can of course also be related to geopolitics, and in particular Cold War concerns over Soviet accomplishments in space, and more recently of the growing space power of China. In this sense aliens, are not only the female ‘other’ but also the political ‘other’—the lesser-human inferior powers who dare to challenge Western dominance of space (the Western subject being the “true” and good “human”). Thus outer space politics are imbued with meaning, with potential

¹⁴ An interesting point made in Michèle Barrett and Duncan Barrett, *Star Trek: The Human Frontier*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001. See “Introduction: Earthrise” pp. 1-6.

influence on future policies and exploration projects. It re-inscribes history through the experience and understanding of the dominant subject (Sardar 2002, 2)—of the masculine and of the West.

On a practical level, the gendered portrayal of our future in outer space serves to construct perceptions of women's role in society. While men are portrayed as heroes and explorers, women are usually reserved for supportive roles. When women do take a central position, such as with Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien*, they must become first masculinized. The final scenes of *Alien* provide us an interesting observation in this regard. It is during this time that Ripley, in the belief that the Queen Alien is dead, is able to put down her gun – and removes most of her clothes. This returns her to a state of femininity. When the Queen Alien is revealed to still be alive in a terrifying comeback, Ripley's now mostly naked body seems even more vulnerable and at risk.

Reinforcing the perception of women as naturally akin to supportive roles in society (even future society) both limits the aspirations of women in (outer space) politics, and also reinforces wider perceptions of women's 'naturally' inclined to support roles.¹⁵ Science fiction portrayals of alien relations also reinforces masculine perceptions of power as physical, technological, and strategic capabilities. In *Mars Attacks!* the American government first proposes to assume that the aliens are amiable and to attempt a peaceful interaction. This is indicative of a feminine perspective of power, as the ability to act in concert or to take actions in connection with others¹⁶. That the aliens are then dominating and violent serves to undermine and patronize such perceptions of power, and reinstate power as the exercise of dominance.¹⁷

Additionally, this conceptualization of outer space, embedded in the discourse of otherness, reinforces gendered (and geopolitical) dynamics in world politics. In relation to the perception of women, the portrayal of women as aliens reinforces the conceptualization of women as fearful deceivers, as dangerous in their ability to seduce, in their subversive desire to dominate, and of the vagina dentate to castrate.

Highlighting the potential threat from outer space also reinforces the perceived need for masculine heroes and high technology weapons. Ironically, while in science fiction the threat often comes from alien-females, the portrayal as such reinforces the military system. Women are seen as the vulnerable, in need of protection, and men as the protectors and wielders of military power.¹⁸ This supports patriarchal values, and the role of women and men in both society and industry.¹⁹

Conclusion

¹⁵ Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*; #

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt...

¹⁷ Nancy Hardstock...

¹⁸ Jean Bethke Elshtain 1987. *Women and War*. Brighton: Harvester Press.

¹⁹ Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*; #

The portrayal of aliens as female in science fiction is in part an understandable product of the fantasies of the male writer and consumer. However, the argument of this paper is that this aspect of science fiction is also intimately linked to wider discourses of dominance over both women and outer space. Making aliens female designates them as the fearful, manipulative, and dangerous other. It suggests that they are tied to nature and are organically inter-connected in a dangerous way, and therefore require domination by technology, wielded by the Western individualist male hero. Portraying them as female pre-establishes the 'natural' role of both men and women in the dominance of outer space.

While science fiction is merely the realm of 'what if', it nonetheless clearly reflects what is, and, we argue, preconditions perceptions of what could be. Deconstructing the gender dynamics of science fiction allows us to understand the discourses that are being recreated and intertextually reinforced. Thus the patriarchal and Western status of international politics are seemingly legitimized. The alien/female preconditioned for a position of subordination against the masculine self. And the status of outer space as a region to be conquered and dominated is reinforced.