

Reproducing the Fin-de-siècle Gothic with Techno-Gothic Vampires

By Antonio Sanna

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REPRODUCING THE FIN-DE-SIECLE GOTHIC WITH TECHNO-GOTHIC VAMPIRES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE *ALIEN* QUADRILOGY AND BRAM STOKER'S *DRACULA'S EXILE*

Abstract

Many critics have agreed on defining both the Dracula novel by Bram Stoker and the Alien series as horror narratives, with specific reference to the latter as a form of contemporary Gothic. Indeed, several collections of critical essays and scholarly volumes on the Gothic analyse both the work of Dracula and the Alien films. In this article, I intend to examine the similarities between Stoker's 1897 work and the four films of Alien, produced between 1979 and 1998. Specifically, I will examine the characteristics of the 1890s Gothic and refer them to the Alien films. These works can be associated to each other by comparing the scholarly work by the critics and particularly their focus on the sexual metaphors and contents present in these texts. Certainly, innumerable literary and cinematographic texts utilize Gothic tropes. However, the representation of the mouth as a sexual organ and its continual association with the Gothic trope of oral violence is a common characteristic of Dracula and the Alien quadrilogy [used sometimes for "tetralogy" - editor's note].

Several characteristics of the fin-de-siècle literary Gothic to which Bram Stoker's *Dracula* belongs can be traced in the *Alien* quadrilogy. Firstly, the very settings and atmospheres of the *Alien* films are similar to those used in late-nineteenth-century Gothic novels. In the typical representation of the house in fin-de-siècle Gothic, the modernity of the setting is coupled with what Chris Baldick defines as "a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space" (35) as well as with what Mario Praz calls "an anxiety with no possibility of escape" (qtd. in Dryden, 39). Narrow openings, underground tunnels and secret passages are present in Gothic castles, abbeys, ruins; towns themselves are transformed into dark labyrinths where the most ominous actions occur. In *Dracula*, the character of Jonathan Harker discovers the ruined chapel in which the Count sleeps by descending several unexplored stairways and exploring the multiple corridors and passages of the Transylvanian castle in ruins (63). Harker feels trapped and lost inside the vampire's castle: he doubts his own sanity and comes to affirm that "safety and the assurance of safety are things of the past" (Stoker 49). Similarly to Harker, the characters of the cinematographic quadrilogy feel trapped inside their human environment. This is made of: the dark tunnels of the starship *Nostromo* in *Alien* (directed in 1979 by Ridley Scott), the narrow and claustrophobic passages of the colony on L.V. 426 in *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), the labyrinthine corridors of the prison on Fury 161 in *Alien³* (David Fincher, 1992) and of the starship *Auriga* in *Alien Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997).

Secondly, exemplary of the Gothic genre of the late-Victorian period is an "anxiety about 'otherness'" (Dryden 9). In the *Dracula* novel, otherness has been specifically attributed to the figure of the Count. The vampire has been differently interpreted as representing what the nineteenth-century white male saw as the Other, as a figure potentially threatening the status quo of the patriarchal society of the period. According to Judith Halberstam, for instance, *Dracula* can be interpreted as a figure for the foreigner, the Jew (96, 105); whereas Alexandra Warwick argues that the vampire represents the revolt of the East against the British empire as well as the threat coming from a man who unites and mixes human and animal attributes (85). In the *Alien* series, otherness is exemplarily embodied by the alien and hostile creature which belongs to a species previously unknown to the human beings of the future, comes from an unexplored planet, and whose origin is never explained in the narrative. The alien perfectly epitomises the figure of the foreigner, with whom it is impossible to communicate and whose instinctual and animal nature cannot be tamed.

Another typical characteristic of several late-Victorian narratives of horror is the invasive expansion of the villain's domain over the realm previously exclusive to the human beings (Aguirre 205-06). In *Dracula*, the threat from a hostile foreigner is brought home by means of the whole city of London being dangerously

put under the potential siege of the vampire. Indeed, every human being (whether man or woman) could be "contaminated" by the vampire and then transform him/herself into an Undead. In the novel, the metropolis of London is therefore turned into a potential colony of vampires. Similarly, in the first instalment of the *Alien* series, the alien creature discovered by a group of astronauts on an abandoned starship on the planet L.V. 426 finally haunts the human environment of the starship Nostromo on which it has been brought and decimates its crew. Successively, the families living on the colonised planet L.V. 426 in *Aliens* are assaulted and exterminated by the aliens, which consequently found their own colony in their place. In *Alien³*, the prisoners of Fury 161 are slaughtered by the creature arrived on board the escape pod from the starship Sulaco and, in *Alien Resurrection*, the soldiers aboard the Auriga are forced to abandon the ship when the aliens break free from confinement.

The potential "contamination" enacted by the vampire also implies what Kelly Hurley defines as the "nostalgia for the 'fully human' subject" characterising several Gothic works of the 1880s and 1890s (4). In *Dracula*, this is enacted by means of the figure of the Transylvanian Count, who is able to communicate with, submit and transform himself into animals such as wolves, bats and rats. Dracula cannot be considered as a human being because he unites human and animal attributes and abilities. Similarly, in the *Alien* films, the human subject is undone by being fertilised and then killed by the alien creatures. In fact, when humans are grabbed by the facehugger (the crab-like creature born out of the eggs), they become impregnated by the foreign body of the baby alien. Both men and women are potential preys to the contamination and fertilization enacted by the alien creature. Binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine and active/passive are therefore annihilated in the *Alien* films, precisely as in the case of *Dracula*. Being "contaminated" by the facehugger implies the membership to the alien family. This is explicitly stated in *Alien³*, when Ripley (the main character of the quadrilogy, interpreted by Sigourney Weaver), after discovering that she is "pregnant" with a baby alien, addresses the adult alien that she is chasing with the words: "don't be afraid, I'm part of the family". Close contact with a vampire or with the alien creature thus implies the loss of the human identity and of the community with other human individuals.

This is fully actuated in *Alien Resurrection*, as Jackie Stacey (273) and Catherine Constable (191) argue, when noting that Ripley - who has been cloned at the beginning of the fourth instalment of the series after she died at the end of *Alien³* - is a hybrid that possesses both the human and the alien DNA. Ripley's highly-evolved instinctual behaviour and abnormal strength are depicted as very similar to those of the aliens. In this case, Ripley has become monstrous, close and akin to the inimical creature she has fought throughout her life. The estrangement enacted on her in the second and third films - when her knowledge of the existence of the extraterrestrial and inimical form of life, of the stranger, was not initially believed by the other human characters - is thus furthered to a maximum level in *Alien Resurrection*. By means of her condition as a transgenic clone, Ripley is the Other, as Fred Botting has affirmed (291). In the last film of the quadrilogy, then, otherness is ultimately embodied in a human being. Ripley herself finally embodies the condition of "nostalgia for the 'fully human' subject" described by Hurley as typical of late-Victorian monstrous creatures (4).

Nevertheless, one of the characteristics of late-Victorian Gothic most emphasised in the critical works published during the past twenty years is the genre's frequent and implicit reference to sexuality. Almost everything in the novel *Dracula* has been read as a metaphor of sexual performances, though undercoded in terms of explicit language (Gelder 67). We cannot state that the 1897 novel is explicitly narrating of sexuality, but, as Robert Mighall has suggested, it is the critics who made "vampirism a self-evidently erotic activity" (271). For example, the transfixion of a vampire's heart with a wooden stake is read by Christopher Craft as a metaphor for phallic penetration (277). Knives, swords and syringes in Stoker's novel have been interpreted as phallic objects. For instance, after the repeated attacks of the vampire on the young Lucy Westerna, Van Helsing and the other men of the Crew of Light attempt to save her life with several blood transfusions (Stoker 150). However, the three men who offer Lucy their own blood (Arthur Holmwood, John Seward and Quincey Morris) are actually her suitors. This act has been seen by Regina Gagnier as a metaphor for sexual penetration, with a series of men injecting a liquid of their own inside the body of a woman (145). Similarly, in *Alien³*, Ripley is given a cocktail of drugs by doctor Clemens (Charles Dance) in order to recover her strength after the ruinous landing of the Sulaco's escape pod. It is significant to note that the individual penetrating Ripley with a needle is also the only person in the entire quadrilogy

with whom she has a sexual intercourse - an action which is rendered all the more evident by the fact that she spontaneously offers her arm to the doctor in order to be penetrated by the needle. This is further emphasised by the director of the film David Fincher by means of the insistent repetition of the extreme close-ups of the needle insertion, as Ximena C. Gallardo and C. Jason Smith have suggested (145). We could therefore interpret this scene as demonstrating the willing disposition of Ripley to clearly assume for the first time a sexual identity, to tacitly accept an external object entering her own body. Syringes and needles then seem to represent or anticipate an act of sexual nature both in the *Dracula* novel and the *Alien* films.

In the critical debate on the *Alien* series as well, many actions have been read as metaphors of sexual actions. According to Gallardo and Smith, for example, the hyperventilating breaths of Ripley when approached by the creature near the end of *Alien* reproduce the quick breaths of a woman during a sexual intercourse, and specifically in a pornographic film (59). Phallic symbols have been seen also in many objects used by some of the male characters in the four films, such as Bishop's knife in *Aliens* or Ash's pornographic magazine in *Alien* (Gallardo and Smith 51, 89). On the other hand, even the architectural motif of the unknown alien starship on which the alien is initially discovered in the first two films has been sexually coded as "abstract genital" (Doherty 196). Most importantly, the adult alien creature (designed by H. R. Giger) has been noted for the phallic shape of its head and has been then interpreted as epitomizing, by extension, the penetrative phallus (Bick 49). It has been seen as "a kind of science fiction *phallus dentatus*", especially in the first film of the series where it is definitely coded as male (Kavanagh 76). When coded as female, as in the case of the alien queen of *Aliens*, the creature has been seen as representing the "phallus of the negative mother" (Creed 268), the very embodiment of a female threat to masculinity and male power in the patriarchal world.

It is interesting to note that, in all of the critical arguments focusing on sexuality which respectively relate to the *Alien* series and *Dracula*, fundamental importance has been attributed to the organ of the mouth. The (sexual) power of the vampire has been considered as residing in the mouth, in the phallic status of its penetrative teeth. Indeed, Cindy Hendershot argues that vampires possess "only one sex organ - the mouth" (23), which leaves no physical signs of difference between the aggressions of a female or male vampire. According to critics of Stoker's work, the mouth is said to both kiss and consume, "the same organ gratifying two distinct hungers" (Spencer 321). This is particularly evident in the novel's chapter in which Jonathan Harker is ambushed by Dracula's three wives (Stoker 51-52). Harker's repulsive fear and simultaneous voluptuous desire to be penetrated by the three vampires' teeth have been read as fusing an adult's male simultaneous desire and fright for the possibility to experience female passive sexuality or homosexual passive intercourse (Craft 261-62). Another example is given in the passage in which Mina is forced by the Count to drink his blood: she recounts that

when the blood began to spurt out [of the open wound in Dracula's chest],
he took my hands in one of his, holding them tight, and with the other seized
my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate
or swallow some of the - Oh, my God, my God What have I done? (Stoker 343)

This scene has been commented upon as depicting an act of oral intercourse. By considering that she is forced to assume a passive and submitted position as well as that she almost prudently refuses to mention the name of the liquid she is obliged to drink, Mina could be seen as performing a fellatio. On the other hand, the fact that Mina drinks from an open wound - a metaphor for the female reproductive organs - has stimulated an interpretation of this passage from *Dracula* as also representing the act of cunnilingus (Craft 278).

The mouth assumes a fundamental relevance in the *Alien* films as well: it is the part of the body that the alien creature uses in order to kill its preys. It is shaped in the form of a double set: a mouth with a tongue which is actually a second mouth full of teeth. Teeth are the instruments for the alien also to capture its victims before transporting them to the incubation areas, where the eggs laid down by the alien queen are located. By biting a victim, the alien thus initiates a process bringing about its own reproduction. In these films the mouth is also the object of many close-ups. This usually occurs a few moments before a victim of the alien is bitten, as in the case, for example, of Parker (Yaphet Kotto) in *Alien* and Burke (Paul Reiser) in *Aliens*. Similarly, at the beginning of *Alien Resurrection*, the main titles are superimposed on the fugitive apparitions of the various clones of Ripley. Every clone is characterized by a single detail of its body. Three

of the seven clones' mouths are displayed in this scene, a detail which is clearly put in evidence by the director of the film. This is due to the fact that the character of Ripley died at the end of the previous film. The spectator then watches the beginning of the fourth film in the series surely with much attention as well as with some expectations as relating to an explanation for Ripley's return. In the moment in which the attention of the viewer is much focused, particular emphasis is given to the representation of the mouth.

Furthermore, the tongue of the alien itself has been seen as a phallic symbol. According to Gallardo and Smith, for example, the toothed tongue is a "symbol of the power of penetration and feminisation of the human body" (177). According to Amy Taubin, the mouth is "hermaphroditic: while the double jaws represen[t] the inner and outer labia of the *vagina dentata*, the projectile movement of the inner jaw [is] a phallic threat" (94). This could be confirmed by the fact that the use of the tongue by the alien creature sometimes recalls a sexual act. We could think of the scene in *Alien*³ in which one of the characters is being eaten by the monstrous alien in the corridors of the prison during the prisoners' final attempt to entrap it. This scene apparently looks like the copulation of two persons. The man upon whom the alien is feeding lies inactively under the creature. This could then be seen as a representation of patriarchal and heterosexual sex, in which the female, by motionlessly lying under the male, is completely passive and submitted. We could also interpret this scene as a representation of pornographic heterosexual sex in that the couple is voyeuristically spied upon by another man. The analogy between feeding and copulating is furthered by the fact that the prisoner witnessing the scene aggressively addresses the alien with the words "come and get me, you fucker." He thus seems to attribute such a sexual role to the alien being. Successively, while being followed by the creature, this prisoner runs through the corridors while screaming: "It's behind me [. . .] it's still behind me", as if the alien is attempting to take (copulate with) him from behind, as in a homosexual intercourse.

Teeth are also shown as necessary to the very birth of the alien. Indeed, the evolutionary phase of the alien which follows the facehugger is the birth of the baby alien out of the humanoid chest. Once implanted in the body, the alien feeds on its host and then literally gnaws its way out (Speed 137). The very process of birth is therefore actuated by the baby creature by means of its teeth, as we can see in the case of Kane's death (John Hurt) in *Alien* or the adult female colonist's death in *Aliens*. Birth, sustenance, reproduction and copulation: all of these moments constituting the phases of the alien's life are organised and structured around the importance of the mouth and the teeth.

Nevertheless, in the *Alien* quadrilogy, the mouth is also the threatened locus. It is particularly through the mouth that the alien enters and infects the human body. To be attacked in the mouth implies also that a person is rendered mute. This has been particularly pointed out by Stephen Mulhall, who argues that "to occupy the role of women in relation to men is to have one's mouth stopped or gagged, to be rendered mute" (21). This is the fate of the victims of the facehugger, whose shape appears to be a reproduction of a sexual act of oral nature. Indeed, the creature's tentacles are very similar to a pair of human hands holding the victim's head still in order for the oral penetration to occur. Moreover, the lower side of the facehugger has an organic vaginal appearance, as Gallardo and Smith have noticed (37-39), but, by means of its appendage forced down the throat of the human being, it definitely acts according to a masculine principle of penetration and impregnation. The victims of the facehugger can thus be seen as performing both cunnilingus and fellatio, precisely as in the case of Mina when forced to drink Dracula's blood in Stoker's novel.

The representation of the alien's mouth as vampiric as well as the behaviour of the alien creature as a kind of vampire is particularly stressed in *Alien*³. A clear example could be the scene in which one of the prisoners (Kevin) is attacked by the alien and bitten in his neck. When Ripley attempts to rescue him, this man dies because of the loss of blood from the wound in his neck, just as it happens in the case of a vampire bite. Another instance is offered when, immediately after doctor Clemens' death, Ripley comes into close contact with the alien. In this specific sequence, Ripley lies on the ground; she is terrorised and seems to be waiting for the creature to kill her, that is, waiting for the creature to bite her. The alien opens its mouth and points its toothed tongue towards Ripley's neck. Ripley even seems to leave her neck exposed to her enemy's attack exactly as a victim of a vampire. This could be confirmed by the fact that the first two shots of this scene are the alternate close-ups of respectively Ripley and the alien: every time the camera frames the alien the only part of Ripley that can be seen is her neck.

Moreover, in *Alien³* and *Dracula*, both the vampire and the alien are referred to as dragons. In Rumanian language, Dracula in fact means "the dragon". In the novel, he is encountered on St. George's day - therefore "indicat[ing] that the battle against Dracula is an archetypal fight with the dragon" (Clemens 171). In *Alien³*, after surviving the encounter with the alien, one of the prisoners of Fury 161 - named Golic (Paul McGann) - calls it "the dragon". Golic, it should be noted, sees the alien for the first time during its murder of his fellow prisoners Boggs (Leon Herbert) and Rains (John Fields), and precisely when the creature's mouth is dripping blood. Golic thus witnesses an action that can be easily associated to the bite of the vampire. In *Alien³ Special Edition*, Golic, who is given a more fundamental role than in the theatrical edition of the film, is portrayed as definitely fascinated by the alien. He feels a sort of telepathic communication with the creature and even addresses it with the words: "talk to me, the beast". This is very similar to the telepathic relationship between Renfield and Dracula in Stoker's novel. Golic escapes from confinement and reaches the door behind which the alien is kept prisoner precisely in the manner in which, in the *Dracula* novel, Renfield escapes from Carfax lunatic asylum in order to reach the door of the chapel behind which Dracula rests (188-89). Both Golic and Renfield are deemed to be mad by the other characters of respectively the novel and the film, and they both die by the hand (or, we should specify, the mouth) of the monster.

In this respect, there are many connections between Stoker's novel and the *Alien* quadrilogy. Particularly, sexual metaphors are central to all of these texts. Specific relevance is given by Stoker as well as by the directors of the four films to the organ of the mouth, which is used by both vampires and aliens in order to feed and reproduce. Vampiric sexualities are therefore a metaphor which frequently underlies the *Alien* quadrilogy and we could define the alien creatures as "techno-Gothic" vampires (Botting 289), as a contemporary science-fiction representation of vampires dense with sexual metaphors.

This statement does not contradict the argument that, whereas Count Dracula represents a threat coming from the past which haunts the metropolis of London contemporary to Bram Stoker's readers, the *Alien* films are set in a future time remote to contemporary viewers. Nevertheless, in both the text of *Dracula* and the *Alien* series, the threat represented respectively by the vampire and the alien creature actually derives from something which belongs to the past and anachronistically haunts the characters' present. This has been considered by Julia Briggs as a typical characteristic of the Gothic genre at large (17, 25). Particularly in the fin-de-siècle Gothic, secular and religious supernatural powers belonging to the past are coupled with the prosaic modern world, therefore producing a clashing effect. This establishes a sort of in-between area, which is the field of the characters' actions and movements in Gothic tales. In Stoker's 1897 novel, the threat coming from the past is epitomised by the fact that the vampire represents a rural and ancient world, dominated by the laws of nature. The Count, by being able to command the winds and turn himself into a fog or into various animals, "signifies the link between the human and animal worlds that modern urban life tends to obscure" (Clemens 158). Similarly, in the *Alien* films, humanity is represented by modernity and technology, whereas the alien creature is purely organic and effectively "prehistoric in its appearance" (Taubin 94). In fact, the alien seems to be a sort of dinosaur, of ancient reptile, and is discovered on a planet whose atmosphere and aspect are, in the words of Ash (the scientist of the *Nostromo*), "almost primordial". According to Valdine Clemens, this implies that the very past of humanity, its protoplasmic origin is what haunts and exterminates the human characters of the *Alien* quadrilogy (214-15).

This argument could be further extended if we also consider that the alien creature's mouth is represented as continually dripping slime. Following Camille Paglia's suggestion that the film explores "our evolutionary revulsion from slime, our site of biological origin" (qtd. in Clemens 216), we could see the slime continually dripping from the hostile creature's mouth as epitomizing the revenge of matter over the progress and technology created by human beings, who are able to fly on galactic starships through several star systems, but are then viciously killed and eaten by the aliens. In the same respect, both the characters of Dracula and Ripley's clone (in *Alien Resurrection*) embody a temporal dislocation which renders them apart from the rest of humanity. They both belong to past centuries far from the reality they live in. Dracula was born four hundred years before the people of London he lives among in the central part of the novel. Ripley has been cloned two hundred years after she died at the end of *Alien³*. Though set in a distant future, the narrative of the *Alien* series thus represents a threat coming from the past which anachronistically clashes with the characters' present.

This forces the human characters of both the novel and the films to resort to ancient weapons and means in

order to fight and defeat their adversary. In *Dracula*, the group of men fighting the vampire has to resort to magic, to pagan superstitions and a set of beliefs abandoned or disdained by the modern urban civilisation they live in. They have almost to return to the laws governing a more rural and ancient world, and to folklore "as a repository of knowledge" (Kramer 77). Similarly, in *Alien*, the crew of the Nostromo, though equipped with modern technology, is not able to sufficiently fight back the alien. They have to improvise some weapons when they decide to haunt it back and finally make use of a rudimentary flame-thrower. By resorting to fire, they thus resort to the past of humanity, to one of the primordial weapons used by prehistoric men and women. This is explicitly stated by Ripley in *Alien*³, when complaining of the absence of weapons in the penal colony of Fury 161. She recommends constructing some weapons (such as torches) in order to scare and fight the alien with the fire, specifying that "most humans have enjoyed that privilege since the Stone Age".

We can therefore affirm that the *Alien* films reproduce fears and anxieties of the late-Victorian age. These are: the concern about an unknown Other, the nostalgia for the loss of a completely human subject, the overtly sexual nature of the adversary's menace for the human body and the anachronistic threat of a monster which comes from a past epoch remote to that of the human characters. The "inheritance in time" (35) which, according to Chris Baldick, is a central component of Gothic texts can be thus found in the *Alien* quadrilogy as well. These films can be seen as founded on the dichotomy of past and future as well as they are permeated by the necessity to express contemporary concerns by means of future settings, but also by means of a re-elaboration of tropes and arguments which belong to the past of the Gothic genre itself.

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Author Information

Antonio SANNA received his PhD at the University of Westminster in London. His publications include articles on James's "The Turn of the Screw", Stoker's *Dracula*, H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Victorian ghost stories and *Beowulf*; the *Alien* quadrilogy, Ridley Scott's *Hannibal* and the Harry Potter films. He has contributed to *The Dictionary of Literary Characters*.