Reviews of the first edition:

‘Mulhall’s philosophical discussion of each film is highly stimulating. A provocative and engaging book which makes for stimulating reading for anyone interested in both film and philosophy.’

Matthew Kieran, Philosophical Books

‘The themes he identifies as central – most crucially, a concern with human embodiment and thus, with both human generativity and mortality – are explored convincingly, even brilliantly at times. . . . Despite the amount of closely argued material which is packed into a relatively short book, the clarity and precision of the writing make it something of a page-turner.’

Deborah Thomas, European Journal of Communication
In this significantly expanded new edition of his acclaimed exploration of the relation between philosophy and film, Stephen Mulhall broadens the focus of his work from science fiction to the espionage thriller and beyond.

The first part of the book discusses the four Alien movies. Mulhall argues that the sexual significance of the aliens themselves, and of Ripley’s resistance to them, takes us deep into the question of what it is to be human. These four chapters develop a highly original and controversial argument that films themselves can philosophize – a claim Mulhall expands upon and defends in part two of this book, before applying his interpretative model to another sequence of contemporary Hollywood movies: the Mission: Impossible series.

A new chapter is devoted to each of the three films in that series, discussing them in the context of other films by the relevant directors. In this discussion, the nature of television becomes as central a concern as the nature of cinema; and this shift in genre also makes room for a detailed reading of Spielberg’s Minority Report.

On Film, Second Edition is essential reading for anyone interested in philosophy, film theory and cultural studies, and in the way philosophy can enrich our understanding of cinema.

Stephen Mulhall is Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at New College, Oxford, and author of Heidegger and Being and Time (Routledge) and The Conversation of Humanity.
ON FILM

Second edition

Stephen Mulhall
FOR ELEANOR (ONCE AGAIN), AND FOR MATTHEW – WHO LIKED THE MOTOR-BIKE CHASE
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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I’m grateful that Routledge have made it possible for me to produce a second edition of this little book, and so given me the chance to recall and redouble the pleasure I took in its original composition. Since, however, this new version of that original subverts in various ways the expectations a reader might reasonably have of ‘a second edition’, some initial words of orientation seem called for.

In order to achieve all the goals that I set myself for this edition, it needed to be far longer than the original; and since this forced me to contravene one of the central principles of the Thinking in Action series to which the first edition belonged, this second edition can no longer claim to be part of it (although I hope that it continues to conform to another of its principles – that of accessibility to a non-academic readership).

I have made use of the additional space in ways which are reflected in the division of this new book into three parts. Part I reproduces in its entirety the text of the five chapters that made up the first edition. The introduction is essentially unaltered, and the four following chapters have been slightly expanded to include brief new discussions either of other films by the relevant director or of films that at least appear to constitute additions to series whose earlier members were discussed in the original chapter. So, Chapter 1 now includes remarks on Scott’s Gladiator, Black Hawk Down and Kingdom of Heaven; Chapter 2 discusses Terminator 3; Chapter 3 looks at Fincher’s The Game, Fight Club, Panic Room and Zodiac; and Chapter 4 addresses Jeunet’s Amelie, as well as Alien vs
Predator. Otherwise, everything that originally appeared in these five chapters reappears here.

Parts II and III, by contrast, both consist of new material. Part II is conceived of as transitional, and so its two chapters look, respectively, backward and forward. Chapter 5 aims to respond to the main objections raised by critics of the first edition, and so to clarify the conception of film’s relation to philosophy that underlies both editions. Chapter 6 is intended to return the reader to the book’s primary emphasis on reading specific films, by offering a detailed interpretation of Spielberg’s Minority Report. In so doing, it looks forward to the work of Part III, by exemplifying a shift of generic focus (from science fiction to thrillers pivoting around conflict between upholders and violators of the law) and a switch of attention from Sigourney Weaver to Tom Cruise (taken as exemplars of stardom).

Part III aims further to test the plausibility of the original interpretative model advanced in the first edition. It does so by retaining my original focus on a specific series of Hollywood movies (a set of interlinked sequels each of which exemplifies the work of a different director, and so simultaneously invites consideration of its relation to other films by the same hand or eye, and an evaluation of its way of inheriting the cinematic universe established by his predecessors), but varying other parameters established in that earlier discussion. For the three Mission: Impossible films operate in a different genre to that of the Alien series; the directors involved (De Palma, Woo and Abrams) have either no established cinematic body of work, or one which has raised unremitting questions about its superficiality or fascination with mere appearance; and the series as a whole is indebted from the outset to work in another medium entirely – that of television – whose differences from the medium of cinema thereby become a matter of compelling interest. This series accordingly engenders a range of questions about modernism (as opposed to postmodernism or modernizing) in cinema that were less explicitly addressed in the Alien series; although, in doing so, surprisingly similar questions to those posed in and by the Alien films – questions about identity and embodiment, and about film’s capacity to reflect on its distinctive powers – turn out to recur in this new context.
Accordingly, the three chapters that make up Part III reproduce the general, Janus-faced template of the four substantial chapters in Part I. They each look both at an individual director’s contribution to the series that is my central concern and at other related work by that same director; but they follow the specific issues that arise as a result of reapplying that template wherever they happen to lead, and so broach some questions that remain largely untouched in Part I.

In effect, then, significantly more than half of this second edition consists of entirely new material, and almost all of that is contained in new chapters covering new films rather than in expanding or qualifying my original treatment of the films I originally chose to discuss. Since, however, this new edition contains an extended defence of the procedures of the old, and its new material otherwise amounts to a further extension of those procedures, it seems to me nevertheless to form a single, unified text, even if its new claims and readings are not exactly predictable in either structure or content from the old material that it retains. I hope that those familiar with the first edition will feel that the range of reference of the second (both philosophically and cinematically) has expanded in a way that merits their renewed attention.

Whilst this edition contains much material not contained in the first edition, some of that new material first appeared in other contexts (even if in very different forms). Earlier and much shorter versions of Chapter 5 appeared in Film and Philosophy, vol. 9 (2005) – under the title ‘Ways of Thinking’ – and in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Volume CVII, part 3 (2007) – under the title ‘Film as Philosophy: The Very Idea’. An earlier and much shorter version of the material that here appears as Chapters 7 and 8 was first published in Smith and Wartenberg (eds), Thinking through Cinema: Film as Philosophy (Blackwell: Oxford, 2006) under the title ‘The Impersonation of Personality: Film as Philosophy in Mission: Impossible’. I would like to thank all those involved in these publications for giving me the opportunity to begin thinking about this new material, as well as the three anonymous readers commissioned by Routledge to offer critical suggestions on the idea of a second edition by way of critical comments on the first (and,
of course, those who published critical comments on the first edition in various fora).

I would also like to thank Alison Baker, for reading and offering comments on Parts II and III in manuscript, and for making it possible to compose this second edition without being either overwhelmed by or deprived of Eleanor’s and Matthew’s companionable interruptions.
Part I
INTRODUCTION

The four members of the Alien series (Alien [1979]; Aliens [1986]; Alien³ [1992]; Alien Resurrection [1997]) managed to combine popular success and critical interest in a way matched by very few films produced in the last two decades of the twentieth century.¹ They focus on Flight Lieutenant Ellen Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver) as she confronts the threat posed to herself, her companions and the human race by the spread of a hostile alien species. But this description hardly begins to capture their peculiar economy of simplicity and power – the charismatic force of Weaver’s incarnation of Ripley’s despairing but indomitable courage, the uncanny otherness of the aliens, and of course the alien universe itself, stripped of the clutter of social particularity to reveal receding horizons of mythic significance. It now seems as if it was clear from the outset that it would take more than one film to explore those horizons, and thereby to unfold the full meaning of Ripley’s intimate loathing of her foes.

But there are, of course, more specific reasons for choosing to focus on this series of films in a philosophical book on film – reasons having to do with what one might call the underlying logic of the alien universe they depict. For these movies are pre-occupied, even obsessed, with a variety of inter-related anxieties about human identity – about the troubled and troubling question of individual integrity and its relation to the body, sexual difference and nature. What exactly is my place in nature? How far does the (natural) human ability to develop technology alienate us from the natural world? Am I (or am I in) my body? How
sharply does my gender define me? How vulnerable does my body make me? Is sexual reproduction a threat to my integrity, and, if so, does the reality and nature of that threat depend on whether I am a man or a woman? These are themes that emerge with quasi-mathematical elegance from the series’ original conception of an alien species which involves human beings in the furtherance of its own reproductive cycle, and which thereby confronts its human protagonists with the flesh-and-blood basis of their existence. This issue – call it the relation of human identity to embodiment – has been central to philosophical reflection in the modern period since Descartes; but the sophistication and self-awareness with which these films deploy and develop that issue, together with a number of related issues also familiar to philosophers, suggest to me that they should themselves be taken as making real contributions to these intellectual debates. In other words, I do not look to these films as handy or popular illustrations of views and arguments properly developed by philosophers; I see them rather as themselves reflecting on and evaluating such views and arguments, as thinking seriously and systematically about them in just the ways that philosophers do. Such films are not philosophy’s raw material, nor a source for its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action – film as philosophizing.

Furthermore, the Alien series’ interest in the bodily basis of human identity inexorably raises a number of inter-related questions about the conditions of cinema as such. For the medium is itself dependent upon the photographic reproduction (or, better, transcription) of human beings, the projection of moving images of embodied human individuals presented to a camera. In one sense, in one frame of mind, this phenomenon can appear utterly banal; in another, it can seem utterly mysterious – as fascinating as the fact that a human being can be portrayed in paint, or that ink-marks on paper can express a thought. One might say that cinematic projections, with their unpredictable but undeniable capacity to translate (and to fail to translate) certain individual physiognomies into movie stardom, are one of the necessary possibilities to which embodied creatures such as ourselves are subject; and we cannot understand that subjection without understanding the nature of photographic transcription as such,
hence without understanding what becomes of anything and everything on film.

These questions, about the nature of the cinematic medium, are perhaps those which we might expect any philosophical book on film to address – they are what is typically referred to when philosophers refer to ‘the philosophy of film’; and this book does indeed find itself addressing such questions in a number of places. But it does so because it finds that these films themselves address such questions – because it finds that, in their reflections on human embodiment, they find themselves reflecting upon what makes it possible for them to engage in such reflections, upon the conditions for the possibility of film. In other words, a fundamental part of the philosophical work of these films is best understood as philosophy of film.

But the series has developed in such a way that its individual members have ineluctably been forced to grapple with a range of other conditions for their own possibility. To begin with, each film sits more or less uneasily within the genre of science fiction, with more or less strong ties in any individual case with the adjacent genres of horror, thriller, action, war and fantasy movies; and, although each film can be regarded as self-contained or self-sufficient, hence capable of being understood on its own terms, each succeeding film has also been created in clear awareness of its relation to its forebears. The distinctive character of each new episode in the series is thus in part a consequence of the increasingly complex nature of its thematic and narrative inheritance; but primarily it results from a commitment on the part of the series producers (Gordon Carroll, David Giler and Walter Hill) to find a new director for each episode, and preferably one with great potential rather than with an established cinematic track record. The series so far has used the talents, and helped to make or to consolidate the reputation, of Ridley Scott, James Cameron, David Fincher and Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Each episode can therefore be seen as an early step in the development of a highly influential and acclaimed cinematic career, and hence as internally related to such original and substantial films as Blade Runner, Gladiator and Black Hawk Down, Terminator and Terminator 2, Se7en, The Game, Fight Club and Panic Room, and The City of Lost Children and Amelie.
This unusual conjunction of circumstances means that a detailed study of the Alien series will allow us, first, to examine the ways in which the specific conventions of traditional film genres, and the more general conditions of movie-making in Hollywood (as opposed, say, to those in the independent sector or in Europe), can both support and resist the achievement of artistic excellence. Here, what emerges in the coming chapters will confirm that, if we have not already done so, we can and should move beyond the disabling thought (a thought that can only disable genuine thoughtfulness about cinema) that artistic excellence is necessarily unobtainable in even the most unpromising of Hollywood contexts. Second, such a study also allows an investigation into the condition of sequedom – a mode of movie-making that has appeared to dominate in Hollywood since the late 1990s, as if American commercial cinema had returned to one of its most influential early forms of the 1930s and 1940s, but in a much more self-conscious (sometimes serious, sometimes merely exploitative) way. An important issue here is the way in which a ‘franchise’ can renew itself over time, in part by explicitly reflecting upon what is involved in inheriting a particular set of characters in a particular narrative universe – the constraints and opportunities internal to (what, as a philosopher, I am inclined to call the logic of) that inheritance.

A third reason for studying this series is that each individual member of it is also an individual film in the series of a particularly gifted director’s work. Each such movie can thus be studied as a point of intersection between a director’s talents and artistic vision, and the narrative and thematic potential inherent in the alien universe; each film simultaneously unfolds more of the identity or individuality of its director and of its universe, as if each is made more itself in and through the complementarities and contrasts generated by their intense mutual engagement. In this way, we might be able to make some progress in understanding the general significance of (the insights made available, as well as the confusions engendered, by) our desire to talk of a film’s director as its author, and hence to regard a film director’s œuvre as possessed of a particular thematic and artistic unity.

If, then, the developments of plot and character that make up the individual substance of these films can be thought of as generated
by a reflective engagement with their own status as sequels, and hence with questions of inheritance and originality, then we could say that the series as a whole makes progress by reflecting upon the conditions of its own possibility. We might think of this kind of reflection as particularly demanded of any art in the condition of modernism – in which its own history (its inheritance of conventions, techniques and resources) has become an undiscussible problem for it, something it can neither simply accept nor simply reject. But to make progress by reflecting upon the conditions of its own possibility is also as good a characterization as could be desired of the way in which any truly rigorous philosophy must proceed; for any philosophy that failed to engage in such reflection would fail to demand of itself what it makes its business to demand of any and every other discipline with which it presumes to engage. Hence, as well as thinking of the Alien series as an exemplary instance of cinematic modernism, we might also consider it as exemplary of cinema that finds itself in the condition of philosophy – of film as philosophy.

It is because I believe that these movies can be thought of in this way – as at once film as philosophizing, philosophy of film, and film in the condition of philosophy – that I regard myself as having written a philosophy book on film rather than a book about some films which happens to have some philosophy in it. And it is this same belief that leads me to regard the films under discussion in the following chapters in ways that differ fundamentally from the work of most of the film theorists I came across in preparing to write them. In the course of that preparation, it became clear to me that such theorists exhibit a strong tendency to treat the films they discuss as objects to which specific theoretical edifices (originating elsewhere, in such domains as psychoanalysis or political theory) could be applied. Even the most useful of these discussions would usually begin with a long explanation of the relevant theory and turn to the specific film only at the end, and only as a cultural product whose specific features served to illustrate the truth of that theory – as one more phenomenon the theory rendered comprehensible. Of course, I have no objection to anyone making use of whatever intellectual resources they find pertinent in coming to understand a film’s
power and interest – I will be doing so myself, here and there, in the chapters to come.\textsuperscript{2} However, the approaches I encountered seemed to me to lack any sense that the films themselves might have anything to contribute to our understanding of them – that they might contain a particular account of themselves, of why they are as they are, an account that might contribute to an intellectual exploration of the issues to which these pre-established bodies of theory also contribute, or even serve critically to evaluate those theories, to put their accuracy or exhaustiveness in question.

In short, such film theory as I have encountered tends to see in films only further confirmation of the truth of the theoretical machinery to which the theorist is already committed; the film itself has no say in what we are to make of it, no voice in the history of its own reception or comprehension. One of the reasons this book approaches questions about film through a detailed reading of specific films is precisely to put this tendency in question – to suggest that such films are in fact as capable of putting in question our prior faith in our general theories as they are of confirming that faith. This is, of course, just another way of saying that films can be seen to engage in systematic and sophisticated thinking about their themes and about themselves – that films can philosophize.

Reiterating such a claim about these films, these products of a lucrative Hollywood franchise in a popular commercial genre, might bring to the surface an anxiety that is very likely to emerge whenever a philosopher finds philosophizing going on in places where we tend not to expect it – isn’t such an interpretation of these movies just a matter of over-interpretation, of reading things into them that simply aren’t there? There is, of course, no general way of allaying such anxieties; whether or not a particular reading of a film in fact reads things into it as opposed to reading things out of it is not something that can be settled apart from a specific assessment of that reading against one’s own assessment of the given film (and vice versa). Certainly, to think that my readings must be over-interpretations simply because they quickly find themselves grappling with questions that are of interest to philosophers would suggest a rather impoverished conception
of the intellectual powers of film and of the pervasiveness of matters of philosophical interest in human life.

Nevertheless, this anxiety does accurately register something specific to these particular films – the fact that (in a manner I think of as bequeathed to them by one of their producers, Walter Hill) they appear to demand interpretation, and interpretation of a certain kind. From beginning to end, the Alien films present us with small, isolated groups of human beings framed most immediately against the infinity of the cosmos. Each individual’s inhabitation of the universe appears unmediated by the more complex interweavings of culture and society, those systems of signification which always already determine the meaning of any actions and events encompassed by them; their only carapace or exoskeleton is the bare minimum of technology necessary for their survival (whether an ore-carrying ship, an atmosphere-processing facility, a waste refinery or a covert military/scientific research station). This cosmic backdrop makes it all but impossible to avoid grasping the narrative and thematic structure of the films in metaphysical or existential terms – as if the alien universe could not but concern itself with the human condition as such (as opposed to some specific inflection of that condition, some particular way in which a given human society has adapted, and adapted to, its environment, some individual way of making sense of its circumstances).

In choosing, as my disciplinary bent would anyway incline me, to meet these films’ demand to be understood metaphysically, I do not take myself to be endorsing every element of that understanding (or even endorsing the understanding of philosophy as inherently metaphysical – as opposed, say, to thinking of it as aiming to diagnose or overcome the metaphysical). Neither do I take myself to be overlooking (or denying) the fact that any narrative universe designed to depict humanity sub specie aeternitatis will always exemplify a particular human way of making sense of ourselves and our circumstances – that any given metaphysics is culturally and socially specific, and hence that much of interest might emerge by asking how these films’ metaphysical ambitions relate to the particular historical circumstances of their production.
But, of course, choosing to plot those relations does not negate but rather presupposes a grasp of the relevant metaphysical ambitions; and, by the same token, choosing to focus exclusively upon their metaphysical register does not at all commit me to the view that any other focus is misplaced or otiose. On the contrary, whilst I have attempted to provide a full or complete reading of the series’ underlying (call it metaphysical) logic, in that I have aimed to establish a coherent perspective from which these films do genuinely form a series (a sequence in which each member appears as generated by its predecessor, and generative of its successor), I do not regard that reading as exhaustive or exclusive – as if its validity entails the invalidity of any alternative readings or approaches to reading, of any claims to identify another (metaphysical or non-metaphysical) kind of coherence in their individual and collective identity. The validity of any such claims rather turns, to say it once again, on specific assessments of their bearing on our specific experiences of the films themselves (and vice versa).

All that this book implicitly claims is that philosophy has something distinctive to contribute to the ongoing conversations about particular films and the medium of cinema that play such an important role in contemporary public culture. Philosophy’s voice has a specific register, one that distinguishes it even from that of film theory and cultural studies; but in making itself heard it has (and needs to have) no desire to render other voices mute.

The overall structure of (what is now Part I of) this little book takes the form of four chapters. Each is concerned with one episode in the Alien series, but each also looks in detail at other work by the director of that episode. Chapter 1 develops at some length my understanding of the basic logic of the alien universe; the other three are more preoccupied with the artistic problems and possibilities they pose, as well as the incitements and resistances they generate, for the directors who follow Ridley Scott. Chapter 4, on Alien Resurrection, functions as a conclusion that is also a prologue, since this episode in the series is itself most knowingly constructed as a meditation upon the degree to which any such series can successfully renew itself, and thus places the further continuation of the series in question whilst at the same time
suggesting that its potential for continuation can survive the most thoroughgoing attempts (as, for example, in Alien³) to exhaust or foreclose its narrative possibilities.

I would like to thank Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney for inviting me to contribute a volume to their Thinking in Action series, Tony Bruce at Routledge for helping to develop and support such a worthwhile publishing venture, Philip Wheatley and Alison Baker for reading and offering comments on the book in manuscript form, and a number of anonymous readers for Routledge whose responses also helped to improve the text. The portion of Chapter 1 devoted to Blade Runner is a much-revised version of an article that first appeared in Film and Philosophy, vol. 1, 1994.
Source: 20th Century Fox courtesy the Kobal Collection
Above the sparse opening credits, as the camera pans slowly from the outer rim of a planet’s Saturnian rings across the pitch black of its surface and back out to the opposite rim of those rings, the title of this film is indicated in a slowly emerging sequence of vertical strokes. It thus appears to emerge from the surface of the planet itself, the place from which the alien creature after which the film is named emerges; and it is indicated rather than spelt out, because some of its constituent letters (not being wholly composed of (near-)vertical strokes) are rather implied or suggested, their precise identity left for the viewer to determine in her imagination – just as this film’s director will leave implicit the overall appearance and exact nature of the alien creature itself until (and in some respects beyond) its end. Perhaps, then, we should not expect the exact nature of this film to be any less alien to us than its eponymous protagonist – any less unpredictable from what we think we know that a science fiction or horror movie must be, any less unaccommodated by our existing sense of what the medium of film as such can allow or achieve.

Next, the camera watches the enormous expanse of the Nostromo approach and pass by, with its substantial command module utterly dwarfed by the industrial landscape of domed cylinders and stackpipes (containing 20 million tonnes of mineral ore) in tow behind it. We cut to the interior of the ship: the camera reveals an octagonal corridor, neither spacious nor oppressive, then turns to look down its junction with another corridor; it pans unhurriedly
across a table in a communal area, then down another corridor to
a space cluttered with monitor screens and banks of instruments.
There is movement – the flutter of paper in a draught, the dipp-
ing head of a toy bird – but it is mechanical, devoid of human
significance. Then one of the display screens lights up as a computer
begins to chatter; we see downscrolling symbols reflected in the
visor of a helmet. As the ship absorbs and reacts to this burst of
activity, we cut to a doorway: coats flutter in the draught induced
by the doors as they open, and the camera takes us into a blind-
ingly white, sterile room, dominated by an array of glass-lidded
coffin-shaped modules, each oriented towards a central stem, like
the petals of a flower. The lids rise, to reveal a number of human
bodies: in a series of stately but fluid dissolves, we see one of
them sit up, remove a monitor pad and stand up. He is wearing a
loincloth or a pair of shorts, the whiteness of the material com-
bing with that of the room to accentuate the pallor of his skin;
his eyes are closed, he rubs his face, as if unwillingly acceding to
consciousness. His face – deeply lined and weary, marked by
some kind of suffering from which it has not yet escaped – is
instantly recognizable as that of John Hurt, whose name was
perhaps the most famous of those which appeared during the film’s
opening credits. We think we have finally arrived at the human
centre of the film that is about to begin.

And we are wrong (as we are wrong in taking Janet Leigh’s
character to be the protagonist of Psycho). But we have been shown a
great deal in this prologue that is true to what will follow, true
both to this director and to his tale (as written by Dan O’Bannon).
The slow, calm, controlled movements of the camera have estab-
lished the basic rhythm of the direction – unhurried but supreme-
ly confident that what we will eventually be shown is worthy
of our investment of interest. We can also see Scott’s confidence in
his sets and special effects, even in the wake of 2001 and Star Wars:
they can bear up under close scrutiny in the absence of human
activity, and thus make more credible the normalcy or everyday-
ness of that activity when it finally begins. This is not a cartoon
or fantasy of space technology and interstellar travel; it is a
working ship in the real world of the human future – a world
quickly shown to have inherited our predilection for social hierarchy
and salary disputes, whose bickering inhabitants can barely summon an interest in their fellows or themselves.

Beyond this, the camera’s unhurried scrutiny of the Nostromo’s empty spaces points up the imperturbable self-sufficiency of the ship, its ability to guide itself safely across interstellar distances in the complete absence of conscious human control. This subtly inflects our sense of the relative dependence of human beings and their technological tools. When the crew finally emerge from their ship’s hibernation pods so that they might respond to the unidentified radio beacon, the ship’s need for them in these unusual circumstances only emphasizes their superfluity in normal circumstances. They appear as useful creatures for the ship’s purposes, as if a kind of pet or parasite, and the significance of their own purposes and fate is correspondingly diminished. Indeed, when we come to realize that the planet and the ship of the prologue constitute the entirety of the coming narrative’s locations, and hence that we have been shown the terrain of the film as a whole before its inhabitation by character and narrative, as if demonstrating the world’s continuation beyond our participation in or knowledge of it, this prologue underlines the essential belatedness and relativity of human concerns, their insignificance in the face of the universe which makes them possible.

Most important of all, however, is the complex manner of the crew’s entry into consciousness, and into their own story. On one level, the suddenly deadened soundtrack and sequence of overlapping dissolves that chart Hurt’s emergence into conscious awareness seem to mimic the mode of that emergence – as disorganized and disorienting as his first perceptions appear to be to him, as if he were awaking from a dream. But it could, of course, equally well characterize the process of beginning to dream, of being translated from consciousness to that mode of awareness in which nightmares come; and we have already been shown that nightmare landscape, the source and context of their coming trials. On another level, the crew appears to be undergoing a kind of rebirth.1 They emerge like seeds from a pod, as if extruded by the ship itself, almost as naked as the day they were born; and Hurt’s dazed face registers the impact of the world on his senses as if for the first time. However, his umbilical cord is a monitor
pad and line, the pallor of his body is barely distinguishable from the sterile whiteness of his technological womb, and his sexual organs are covered over; and the presentation of these details through a silenced soundtrack and overlapping dissolves, with their subversion of the conditions of ordinary perceptual experience, now suggest a displacement of reality not by dream but by fantasy. We are being given a picture of human origination that represses its creatureliness, that represents parturition as an automated function of technology rather than of flesh emerging noiselessly and painfully from flesh – as essentially devoid of blood, trauma and sexuality.

Does this fantasy originate in the director, or in the characters themselves, or in the society to which they are returning? Does it represent a consummation devoutly to be wished, or (given the scene’s conjunction of this fantasy’s realization with the onset of nightmare) are we rather meant to see that the monstrousness of life is not so easily to be avoided? It is, at any rate, umbilically linked to the nightmare that is about to penetrate and overwhelm the Nostromo.

### The alien cycle of life

How is it that *Alien* transforms itself slowly but surely from a pure science fiction film into a horror movie, or rather into a highly original hybrid of the two? Why is it that the alien inspires – in the Nostromo’s crew and in us – not only fear and terror, but horror? Stanley Cavell has suggested one way of discriminating between these responses, by discriminating between those aspects of the world to which they respond:

> Fear is of danger; terror is of violence, of the violence I might do or that might be done me. I can be terrified of thunder, but not horrified by it. And isn’t it the case that not the human horrifies me, but the inhuman, the monstrous? Very well. But only what is human can be inhuman. – Can only the human be monstrous? If something is monstrous, and we do not believe that there are monsters, then only the human is a candidate for the monstrous.
If only humans feel horror (if the capacity to feel horror is a development of the specifically human biological inheritance), then maybe it is a response specifically to being human. To what, specifically, about being human? Horror is the title I am giving to the perception of the precariousness of human identity, to the perception that it may be lost or invaded, that we may be, or may become, something other than we are, or take ourselves for; that our origins as human beings need accounting for, and are unaccountable.²

This is why the monster in horror movies is so often a zombie or one of the living dead, a vampire, a botched creation, construction or reconstruction of the human – this is why Frankenstein’s monster is prototypical of the genre. As well as threatening to inflict a peculiarly intimate, distorting or rending violence upon vulnerable human flesh and blood (a threat repeatedly carried out in this film and its successors), these creatures are themselves mutations or distortions of the human. What, then, of Ridley Scott’s alien; what precisely is it about the precariousness of our own human identity that we see in the monstrosity of this monster?

Beyond the threat of violence that this dragon, as big as a man, represents (and to which terror rather than horror is the primary response), there stands first the alien’s motive for inflicting that violence upon the human beings who encounter it. For it harbours no general or specific malice against the human race as such, or against the crew of the Nostromo. It attaches itself to, and exits from, Kane’s body because this is dictated by its mode of reproduction: it can grow only within another living being. And it attacks the rest of the crew because they threaten its survival (hence, at least initially, that of its species) and because they represent the only available means for the continued existence of that species. It is, in short, just doing what comes naturally to any species – following the imperatives of nature.

However, the alien species appears not so much to follow nature’s imperatives as to incarnate them. This is not because it is driven to survive and reproduce, but rather because it is so purely driven, because it appears to have no other drives – no desire to
communicate, no culture, no modes of play or pleasure or industry other than those necessitated by its own continuation as a species. The alien’s form of life is (just, merely, simply) life, life as such: it is not so much a particular species as the essence of what it means to be a species, to be a creature, a natural being— it is Nature incarnate or sublimed, a nightmare embodiment of the natural realm understood as utterly subordinate to, utterly exhausted by, the twinned Darwinian drives to survive and reproduce.

The alien’s monstrosity derives further specificity from the fact that its mode of reproduction is parasitic. After seeing it burst from Kane’s torso, we realize that neither the planet nor the alien ship from which the creature emerged is its true home: we recall the fossilized remains of a member of another alien species encountered within that ship (seated behind what looked like an enormous weapon) with a hole punched through its chest, and realize that the ship’s cargo of eggs was no more indigenous to the ship itself than it is to the desolate planet upon which that ship crash-landed—indeed, that the crash-landing itself might well have been induced by the parasitic alien species’ progressive infestation of that ship’s crew. This parasitism is an extreme manifestation of the relationship any species has with the broader system of nature: it signifies at once their vulnerability to predation by the other species with which they must inhabit the natural realm and their dependence upon their environment for sustenance. Metaphysically, it represents a perception of life itself as something external to or other than the species which incarnates it—something that invades, makes use of, and then discards, any and every manifestation of itself, as if living beings are merely its vehicles, slaves or hosts. The alien’s parasitism exemplifies the essential parasitism of Nature; it represents the radical lack of autonomy that is of the essence of creaturehood—its need to incorporate, and its openness to incorporation by, that which is not itself, and its victimization by the life within it.

However, perhaps the most uncanny aspect of the alien’s monstrosity is determined by the specific mode of its parasitism. For, in order to reproduce, it must insert a long, flexible member into the host’s body through one of that body’s orifices, and
deposit a version of itself within its host’s torso, where it develops to the point at which it must force itself out again. In short, what happens to Kane is that he is impregnated with an alien foetus which his body then brings to term and labours to bring forth into the world; he undergoes a nightmare vision of sexual intercourse, pregnancy and birth. The heart of the alien’s monstrosity is thus that it relates itself to its host species in a manner which embodies a particular fantasy of sexual relations between human males and human females. The threat stalking the corridors and ducts of the Nostromo is thus a vision of masculinity and femininity, hence of sexual difference as such, as monstrous. The monster itself is the incarnation of masculinity, understood as penetrative sexual violence; but, as such, it threatens the human race as a whole with the monstrous fate of feminization, forcing our species to occupy the sexual role (that of being violated, of playing host to a parasite and of facing death in giving birth) that women are imagined to occupy in relation to men.

This thought about the monster’s uncanny parasitism is not contradicted, but is rather made more specific, if we further note its intensely oral focus. In this respect, of course, the alien’s mode of parasitism reflects its general mode of being; for at every stage of its post-partum development, it presents itself to us as all mouth. From the metallic incisors of the near-blind chestburster to the teeth-within-teeth of the warrior, it is as if its nature finds its fullest expression in images of devouring insatiability (and the threat such images pose for men and for women might be taken to be as different, in nature and in depth, as are the threat of castration and that of an infant’s limitless demands on its mother). But the facehugger variant of this being that is all mouth also chooses to penetrate the mouths of its victims when impregnating them; and on the assumption that its mode of reproduction is a monstrous image of the human mode of reproduction, this implies that to occupy the role of women in relation to men is to have one’s mouth stopped or gagged, to be rendered mute (a muteness registered in the long wastes of silence on this film’s soundtrack, and in its sense that any form of negotiation – any conversation or intercourse – with the alien species is utterly beside the point). Heterosexual masculinity here appears as aiming
to silence the woman’s voice, to deny her the most fundamental expression of her individuality. For the human race to be feminized is thus for human individuality as such to be threatened, as if the alien’s monstrosity declares that something about the acknowledgement of individuality (in particular, acknowledging the relation of individuality to sexual difference) sticks in our throats, makes us gag.

What holds these various facets of the alien’s monstrousness together is their relation to human fantasies and fears about human embodiment or animality: collectively, they give expression to an idea of ourselves as victimized by our own flesh and blood – as if it is essentially other than, alien to, what we are, as if our bodies not only made us vulnerable to suffering and death, but made our very humanness precarious. Sexual difference, the drive to survive and reproduce, dependence upon and vulnerability to the natural world: these are all aspects of our creaturely life, features brought to an unprecedented pitch of purity in the alien species but common nevertheless to both human and alien, and yet experienced as monstrous. The alien thus represents the return of the repressed human body, of our ineluctable participation in the realm of nature – of life.

A further aspect of the alien’s incarnation of nature also serves to subvert one of our most familiar ways of repressing our own creaturehood, of understanding our humanness as other to our embodiment. For this alien, is, of course, uniquely well equipped to defend itself; or rather, with its leathery, indefinitely fertile eggs, its foetal teeth and tail, the molecular acid it uses for blood and its capacity to transform its own skin into polarized silicon body-armour, it is its own survival equipment. It has internalized or become its own array of defensive and offensive tools and instruments – its flesh is armour and its blood a weapon; in short, its body is its technology. The alien thereby represents a mode of evolution that is not dwarfed by or in thrall to (say, alienated from) its technology, as the crew of the *Nostromo* appear to be; and, more specifically, it undercuts our tendency to imagine that our social and cultural development, our ability to evolve beyond the limitations of the body by evolving tools and technology (to reduce our vulnerability and improve upon our
natural powers), is the means by which we transcend our naturalness rather than a further expression of it, simply the exploitation of the biological endowment that is distinctive of our species. The alien’s monstrously intimate incorporation of its technology into its nature is a projection of our horror at the thought that culture as such is in fact our second nature – not something other to our naturalness in which our humanity might safely reside, something from which we must accordingly think of our incarnate selves as alienated, on pain of annihilating our humanity.

Ripley and Ash

It seems clear, however, that it is the alien’s monstrous representation of human sexual difference that most fundamentally drives the plot of Scott’s film. For, given the alien’s threatening incarnation of predatory masculinity and its attempt to locate the human as such in the position of femininity, it makes perfect sense that the heroic human protagonist of the drama that unfolds on board the Nostromo should turn out to be a woman rather than a man, and that, of the two female candidates for this role, it should be Ripley rather than Lambert. Thus one of Scott’s most effective subversions of the hybrid genre in which he is working (his association of femininity with heroism rather than victimhood) turns out to be dictated by the logic of his monster’s monstrousness. Hence our sense that Ripley’s final, isolated confrontation with the alien is not accidental or merely a generic twist but more profoundly satisfying – something to which she is fated.

Certainly, no other member of the crew is as sensitive as Ripley to the risks attaching to the alien’s penetration of their second, external or technological, skin – the ship itself; only Ash’s insubordination (his refusal to attend to her voice over the intercom – as if her words were weightless, mere noise) overcomes her rooted determination to keep the stricken Kane outside the airlock. And in her climactic struggle with the alien once it has entered the ship, she succeeds in ejecting it from the shuttle only because she immediately protects herself from it by getting into a
spacesuit. The strength and orientation of Ripley’s instincts here are best understood as giving expression to her instinctive familiarity with, her subconscious inhabitation of, the very conception of femininity in its relation to masculinity that underpins the alien’s monstrousness. She acts consistently from the outset to preserve the physical integrity of the ship she briefly commands because she has all along understood her own femaleness in the terms that the alien seeks to impose upon the human species, and hence has always understood her body as a vessel whose integrity must at all costs be preserved.

The alien’s distinctive mode of parasitic predation is profoundly shocking to the men in the crew, to whom a female subject position – one of vulnerability to rape, impregnation and giving birth – is essentially alien and traumatizing. It is no less so to the only other woman in the crew (Lambert), who – whilst sharing Ripley’s innate caution – is happy to risk the integrity of the ship when she needs to re-enter it, and who is rendered powerless when that integrity is violated. The scene of her death, in which she seems hypnotized by the alien, which is there given its most explicitly sexualized repertoire of gestures (its prehensile tail shown creeping between her legs), suggests that the predatory aspect of masculinity is either too unfamiliar to her, or perhaps in a certain sense too familiar,3 to be gainsaid. On the deepest psychic level, such male monstrosity is no surprise to Ripley at all; it is rather a confirmation of her basic view of the human world of sexual difference, and an opportunity for her to act upon her long-matured comprehension of how best to oppose its essential monstrosity – by doing whatever it might take to avoid the violation of heterosexual intercourse. In short, extending a long-familiar mythological trope, Ripley’s emergence as the human hero of this tale is empowered or underwritten by her implied celibacy; her refusal to submit to the alien’s advances has been long prepared by, is in a sense the apotheosis of, her resolute virginity.

On one level, of course, the purity of her resolution here is precisely what makes her a match for the pure hostility of the alien: she is as profoundly attuned to, and as psychologically well equipped for, survival as the alien itself – and this is perhaps the
germ from which the developing interest of the other films in the series in presenting Ripley and her alien opponent as somehow made for one another (as if each sees the other as its equal or as itself) can be seen in retrospect to have evolved. At the same time, however, what – mythologically speaking – endows Ripley with her drive for survival is her equally resolute repression of her drive to reproduce; and, in this respect, she exists in utter opposition to the alien’s incarnation of that drive. In other words, to become capable and worthy of vanquishing her opponent she must sever the connection between femaleness, heterosexual intercourse and fertility – she must, in short, deny her body’s openness to maternity. This severance is tracked most explicitly by the film in its representation of Ripley’s relationship to the sole embodiment of the maternal principle in the Nostromo – the ship’s computer that the crew all refer to as ‘Mother’.

Like the rest of the crew, Ripley is reborn by Mother from the ship’s technological womb in order to embark on a mission to locate and bring back a member of the alien species, a goal in relation to which her life is deemed utterly expendable: it is as if Mother is prepared to sacrifice the offspring of her own fertility in order to secure the cosmic embodiment of fertility as such. When, after Kane’s and Dallas’ deaths, Ripley gains direct access to Mother, she uncovers this programmed malevolence – and, in so doing, she unleashes upon herself a near-lethal attack from Ash. Against this background, it can seem rather more than accidental that her final plan for bringing about the alien’s destruction should involve the destruction of the ship itself, and hence of the ship’s computer; and when Mother prevents her from aborting that countdown, as if refusing to attend at once to her words and her needs, Ripley herself is clear that this is more than a merely mechanical failure: her response is to scream at Mother, ‘You bitch!’ and attempt to smash the central computer console.

Does this description simply collude with Ripley’s paranoia? Should we dismiss her sense of personal victimization by a machine as a hysterical but understandable confusion between the true villains (the Company who formulated the computer’s instructions) and their unthinking instruments? But, on a Darwinian conception of things, is it not of the essence of Mother
Nature’s fecundity that its individual offspring be seen as the expendable vehicles for the survival and reproduction of the species they instantiate, and that those individual species be seen as expendable vehicles for the survival and reproduction of life as such? In this sense, fertility has only its own reproduction as a goal; hence, children must conceive of themselves as reducible to expressions of and sacrifices to the motherhood of their mothers; and women must conceive of motherhood as reducing them to a vehicle for and a sacrifice to the cosmic principle of fertility.

Hence, Ripley’s extreme detestation of Mother and motherhood, and her extreme detestation of the alien and its predatory parasitism, are at root responsive to the same phenomenon. The condition of maternity involves a double parasitism, because the woman’s body becomes host not just to another individual being but to the principle of fecundity as such. To be a mother means becoming a vehicle for life—sacrificing one’s physical and spiritual integrity to a blind, mechanical force in relation to which nothing (no particular member of a species, and no particular species) has any intrinsic significance. In short, Mother is a bitch because life is a bitch.

It is, however, worth remembering that Scott does suggest at least a vestigial nostalgia or yearning for maternity on Ripley’s part—when he presents her as risking her own safety and the destruction of the alien in order to rescue Jones, the ship’s cat. This animal not only becomes the object of a displaced expression of Ripley’s maternal impulse; it is also, of course, a representation of nonhuman life co-existing in fruitful symbiosis with human beings, and hence provides the shadow of a suggestion that the life of the cosmos is not utterly inimical to human flourishing. The fact that Ripley can more easily allow this impulse to find expression in relation to a nonhuman animal does not exactly subvert her hostility to her own fertility; but it does provide a vital opening for James Cameron’s rewriting of Scott’s broader vision of the essential monstrousness of human fertility and sexuality in *Aliens*.

Nevertheless, within that broader vision, Scott reinforces Ripley’s detestation of motherhood by opposing it to Ash’s uncanny attunement with Mother. Ash is, at the outset of the film, the first
to respond to Mother’s request to speak to Dallas; he runs his continuing task of data collation in parallel with Mother’s, and is the crew member most comfortable with the computational instrumentation that Mother provides for their well-being; he is the only one who was always aware of the true purpose of their mission, and is able to attack Ripley in the computer room because he has his own private means of access to Mother.

And yet, of course, Ash is not himself the offspring of a human mother; he is an android. This constitutes his deepest mode of connection with Mother, but it makes that connection paradoxical in the sense that an essentially asexual being, whose body is composed of circuitry and silicon rather than flesh and blood, should be so intimately identified in this film with maternity, and hence with fertility and nature. This paradox is deepened by the degree of Ash’s identification with the alien: he implicitly guides the expedition to locate the alien eggs, he brings about its entry into the Nostromo, he protects it against the crew’s efforts to kill it (holding back Parker from attacking it when it gives birth to itself from Kane’s chest, providing a highly unreliable set of tools to track it), and his final words to the crew give explicit expression to his admiration for its purity – for the way its structural perfection as an organism is matched only by its hostility, unclouded by conscience or considerations of morality. Most explicitly, when he attacks Ripley, in defence of the alien and on Mother’s behalf, he tries to choke her by inserting a rolled-up magazine into her mouth – thus identifying himself with the alien’s violation of the human body and voice. In other words, the inorganic Ash is as deeply attracted to the alien’s incarnation of the essence of the organic as he is attuned to Mother’s sterile realization of fertility.

The film suggests two ways of understanding this apparent paradox. First, recalling its earlier depictions of the cosmic life principle as somehow external or other to the organic realm, we can infer that the asexual circuitry of Ash and his Mother are intended to represent life as such as not itself alive, essentially not animal or fleshly, but rather a matter of codes and programming. Life as such is the non-organic, super-mechanical, blind determinism that drives the organic realm – call it the codedness of the genetic code. Hence, even when it is fantasized as denuded of
animality, of flesh and blood (as in the film’s opening technological phantasm of birth), its essence (as unfolded to Ripley in Mother’s indifference and Ash’s murderousness) is no less death-dealing than in its alien incarnation (that incarnation of carnality as such, of life’s code made pure flesh). Whether it is conceived of as the alien other of flesh or as its sublime essence, life is monstrous.

The second way of understanding the paradox turns on Ash’s primary role or function in the crew – he is the science officer, and hence the person most thoroughly dedicated to the study and comprehension of nature. His inorganic status here symbolizes much that our culture imagines of the scientist – that he be purely rational, in a way untainted by considerations of emotion, personal opinion or prejudice, or the claims of morality; but also that he be endowed with an overwhelming admiration or awe for the object of his study, a sense of wonder in response to nature and the cosmos. Hence his empathy for the alien, that incarnation of animate matter and animality, the perfect organism. For Ash, beyond its significance as the objective of the mission he has been programmed to take on, the alien symbolizes the true significance of the cosmic principle of life; it signifies the essential insignificance of human morality and culture, and indeed of the human race as such – the fact that we are not at the centre of the universe and its concerns. His willingness to regard the crew of the Nostromo as expendable thus encapsulates a vision of science as essentially amoral or inhuman, not just in that its search for the truth about nature demands that human values be set aside in favour of objectively establishing the facts, but also in that the truth about nature that science reveals is that nature is itself fundamentally amoral or inhuman. Both Ash and his Mother identify themselves with life as such, not with human life and human concerns – after all, they are not themselves incarnations of human life. Little wonder that we feel obscurely satisfied with this film’s presentation of the ship’s science officer as an inhuman being at one with the monster.

My account thus far leaves implicit one other suggestive dimension of the identification of science with the alien. For when Ash imitates the alien’s distinctive parasitic violation of the human
body in forcing a rolled-up magazine down Ripley’s throat, the pictures on the wall around him suggest that it is a pornographic publication; his actions thereby underline the film’s equation of the alien with masculine sexual violence, but they also imply an identification of science with masculinity. The idea is that scientific approaches to nature are in effect violent, an attempt to penetrate or violate the natural realm, as if emotionally neutered and morally neutral observation of and experimentation with nature amounts to its rape. But since Ash is represented as identifying with the essence of the natural realm he is devoted to observing, his essentially masculine sexual violence further implies that the cosmic life-principle as such should be understood, for all its ambivalent externality to the organic realm, as essentially masculine – as if the drive for reproduction is rapacious, inherently violent and violating.

This vision of the cosmos as unstoppable fecundity and endless self-overcoming might be related to certain aspects of Nietzsche’s early, Dionysian vision of what he later calls the will-to-power – the capacity to impose form on the formlessness of chaos, and to destroy or sacrifice any given form in the name of another, newer such form. It is an idea of life as an endless becoming, but according to which fitness for life is a matter of an individual’s or a species’ ability to impose itself not only on its environment but (when necessary) upon itself – for instance by reinventing itself so as to accommodate any irresistible changes in that environment, or to rescue itself from the rigor mortis of stability or stasis, from mere self-repetition. Hence the film’s emphasis upon the alien’s plasticity – its unceasing evolution from one phase or mode of being to another, and its capacity to adapt and defend itself against the most extreme environmental circumstances within the span of its individual life-cycle.

Of course, one might read such an identification of the scientific method and its object of study with male rapacity in another way – to suggest that a vision of nature as essentially will-to-power is not a revelation of nature’s essence but rather a distorting interpretation of nature that gives expression to the masculine sexual violence implicit in the scientific approach that generates it. However, the film’s presentation of Ripley’s almost undeviating
resistance to its central symbols of life understood as will-to-power (whether in the form of heterosexual intercourse, the attentions and intentions of Ash and Mother or the parasitism of the alien) as essentially heroic appears rather to underwrite her perception of fertility or maternity as a violation or rape of femininity, of maternity as demanding an alien inhabitation of her flesh rather than as allowing its fulfilment. It is as if life itself really is to be understood as an inherently masculine assault upon women, in which they function merely as the means for the onward transmission of something (an intrinsically penetrating and aggressive force, or drive, or will) essentially alien to them.

Ripley’s unremitting drive to preserve her integrity is thus, in essence, an expression of her sense of alienation from life, nature and the cosmos, and from everything in herself that participates in – that binds her ineluctably to – that which she hates so purely. For, after all, does she not in the end succeed in imposing her will upon Ash, Mother and the alien itself? Is not her final victory over the monster in the Narcissus (the Nostromo’s shuttle), her success in creating a space from which to give voice to the mayday message that she speaks over the film’s concluding frames, achieved by reshaping her environment (making it a vacuum) and herself (suiting up) so that she might bury a harpoon in the heart of her opponent and in the heart of the heartless cosmos into which her weapon dispatches it? What better exemplification of the masculine will-to-power of which her thoughts, deeds and underlying psychology declare such detestation – quite as if the alien she confronts in the Narcissus is a reflection of herself? (Seeing this beautifully choreographed assault, this seamless dovetailing of heart, mind and spirit in the service of vengeance, we might recall Ash’s description of the alien – immediately after it has burst from Kane’s chest – as ‘Kane’s son’. This is the film’s most explicit reference to the alien’s unmanning capacity to make human males pregnant; but its aural reference to the Bible’s name for the first human murderer further implies that the monster’s death-dealing rapacity is not essentially alien to humanity, but rather at work in the first human family, and never eradicated from the human family as such thereafter. If, then, Ripley is a sister under the skin to Kane’s son, she is Cain’s daughter – offspring
not of God’s beloved Abel but of his wrathful brother, the first violator of human solidarity, condemned by God to be a fugitive and vagabond on the earth, essentially not-at-home in the universe He created.) But if what Ripley hates is what saves her from what she hates (if it is the pure flame of the life in her that overcomes its own monstrous, externalized incarnation), must she end by hating herself, by overcoming that which she hates in herself, or by overcoming her hatred?

The education of a blade runner

Developing answers to these questions will govern the evolution of the Alien series in the hands of other directors; but it also governs the thematic structure and narrative development of Ridley Scott’s next film – Blade Runner (1982). For this film (written by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples) is explicitly concerned with the question of what it is to be human; more precisely, it is obsessed with it – obsessed in the way the leader of the replicants is obsessed with his quest for life, for a life which is on a par with that of human beings. To show that Roy Baty misconceives this quest as one for more life – as if a replicant might become human by living longer – is the goal of the film.

Like Ash, the replicants have no flesh-and-blood mother – but, unlike Ash, they find this deeply traumatizing (a question about his feelings for his mother is what occasions the replicant Leon’s opening murder of Deckard’s colleague). This appears to be because (again unlike Ash) the replicants are not androids but rather products of genetic engineering destined for dangerous or dirty tasks in off-world colonies – hence are themselves composed of flesh and blood. As if to underline this, the film’s relentless violence (quite apart from three ‘retirements’, we witness an attempted strangulation, savage beatings, an attack with an iron bar, deliberately broken fingers and a climax of concentrated physical suffering) is typically directed towards replicants, as if to confront the authorities’ doctrine that such embodied beings are incapable of suffering, are entities upon whom the infliction of pain is not a crime.

What these scenes instead elicit is an instinctive response to this treatment of the replicants which matches our response to
such treatment of human beings; we see their behaviour as expressive of pain and suffering rather than as an empty exhibition by automata. As Roy puts it: ‘We’re not computers . . . – we’re physical’; the violence inflicted upon them establishes beyond political or philosophical debate that the replicants are capable of manifesting the essential range and potential complexity of feeling open to any human being. The empathic claim their pain-behaviour makes upon us is what grounds the film’s assumption that it is this aspect of the replicants’ embodiment which is pertinent to their call for human status, not that of whether anything occupies their bodies.

*Blade Runner* thus rejects any understanding of the human mind or soul as hidden behind, entirely distinct from, the human body. In presenting us with entities whose embodied life has a complexity and range comparable to that of a human being, Scott brings his viewers to apply to them the full range of psychological concepts which constitute the logical space of the mental, and thereby demonstrates that our attribution of a mind to a given creature is a response to the behavioural repertoire with which their particular embodiment endows them. Wittgenstein once remarked that ‘The human body is the best picture of the human soul’; this film dramatizes and projects that insight.

If, however, we are thereby given everything we need to know – indeed, everything there is to know – about the replicants which is relevant to their claim for human status, if we (and anyone in the world of the film) can see that nothing counts against their being treated as human, how and why do most of the human beings in the film apparently fail to see this? Why, for example, does Deckard’s superior, Bryant – the commander of the replicant-hunting blade runner unit – regard the replicants as skin-jobs? The film’s answer is to be found in the fact that Bryant is ‘the kind of lawman who used to call black men “niggers”’; for nothing counts against the replicants being treated as human except the unwillingness or refusal of other human beings to treat them as such. No accumulation of facts or testimony of the senses can compel someone to acknowledge behaviour that fulfils all the criteria of pain-behaviour as the genuine expression of another human being’s pain. Bryant’s failure to acknowledge the
replicants as human is not based on ignorance or repression of these facts, but is rather the expression of one possible attitude towards them. It follows that the humanity of the replicants is in the hands of their fellows; their accession to human status involves their being acknowledged as human by others, and if their humanity is denied, it withers. And in this respect, of course, they once again resemble the human beings who acknowledge or fail to acknowledge them.\footnote{5}

This theme is central to the film’s depiction of the relationship between Deckard and Rachel. Their first meeting takes place across a Voight-Kampff machine, the equipment used by blade runners to assess a subject’s capillary dilation, blush response, fluctuation of the pupil, pheromone discharge and other physiological registers of emotional response – the theory being that replicants lack any empathic attunement with others and thereby betray their difference from human beings. As Tyrell, the designer of the replicants, points out, however, this lack of empathy and its correlative emotional immaturity are determined by the decision of the replicant’s makers to restrict their lifespan to four years, and hence to constrain the range of their memories and experiences. Rachel, by contrast, has been gifted with a past that creates a cushion or pillow for the emotions, but which entails that she does not know that she is a replicant.

Deckard at first sees her failure to pass the V-K test as a simple proof of her nonhumanity, oblivious to the fact that his difficulty in detecting the usual emotional absence in her suggests rather that this lack is contingent, and a matter of degree, i.e. that the replicants might rather be seen as children in an emotional sense through no fault of their own, and thus as capable of maturity, and that some uncontroversially human beings (like Bryant) never attain such maturity.

His denial of Rachel’s humanity intensifies when, in his apartment, he wrenches away the pillow of her past, reciting to her face the memories that make up her inner life and informing her of their ‘true’ origin (Tyrell’s niece); even his attempts to back away from his brutality in the face of her pain are so clumsy as to suggest an inability to care sufficiently about her to do so with any consideration. Even after she saves him from Leon’s murderous
attack, his declaration that he would never personally hunt her down is based on the thought that he owes her one – that they are equals only in the way a debtor and his creditor are equals. When Rachel responds to this by asking whether Deckard has ever taken the V-K test himself, Scott invites us to acknowledge that a refusal to acknowledge another’s humanity constitutes a denial of the humanity in oneself.

Deckard’s redeemability is, however, revealed later in the same scene, when – after finding Rachel at the piano, playing because she cannot even trust her memory of piano lessons – he says, ‘You play beautifully.’ The tact and delicacy of this prepare the ground for a full acknowledgement of their feelings for one another; but Deckard again mishandles things. Aware that Rachel now feels incapable of staking her life on her emotions, and hence of acknowledging her attraction to Deckard, he aims to help her overcome this anxiety; but he does so by pushing her back against the wall and dictating her expression of her feelings (‘Say “Kiss me” … “I want you” … Again … ’). The fact that she then goes on to improvise expressions of her own (‘Put your hands on me’) does not make this initial forcing of words into her mouth any less disturbing a piece of sexual violence.

Deckard’s actual redemption is made plain in the film’s concluding sequence, when he returns to his apartment to find Rachel lying covered in a shroud-like sheet on the couch. But when he removes that covering he finds a way of addressing her which brings her fully (back) to life. In their previous encounter, they faced one another standing, giving the scene a strong vertical patterning which emphasized Deckard’s superior height, strength and aggression; now, he leans over her face from the head of the couch, creating an equally strong horizontal patterning which does away with his physical superiority and suggests that their profiles are complementary. The ensuing dialogue matches this sense of achieved equality: for Deckard now does not dictate Rachel’s dialogue but asks her questions (‘Do you love me? … Do you trust me?’) to which she is free to respond as she pleases, and to which she freely responds in the affirmative. Thus, by creating the terms for a conversation in which Rachel could freely acknowledge her love for him, he acknowledges his love for her,
and the necessary mutuality of any such acknowledgement. These two have earned their escape from the nightmarish cityscape in which everyone’s humanity is at risk.

**The mortality of flesh and blood**

What allows Deckard to redeem his humanity is the further step in his education that occurs between the two conversations with Rachel – the lesson that Roy Baty undertakes to deliver in the film’s climactic sequence in the Bradbury Building. But what licenses Roy to deliver this lesson is his own developing education about what it is to be human, and in particular his coming to learn that acquiring a more extended span of life would go no way towards achieving or establishing his own humanity.

What does it mean to claim that human beings are mortal? Perhaps that they are not immortal, that human beings do not live forever – that a human life must end at some point. This contrast encourages the view that human beings are mortal because their lives occupy a finite quantity of time, that their days are numbered and destined to run out (soon) after three score years and ten. This is plainly the view taken by Roy Baty and his group; their dangerous return to Earth is motivated by the desire for more life – the desire to extend their allotted span of days until it matches that of a human being. One brief scene in the film disinters and undermines the misunderstandings upon which this project is predicated with dizzying speed and subtlety.

After Deckard has shot the replicant Zhora, he is accosted by her partner Leon – who observed the ‘retirement’ – and dragged into an alley, where Leon administers a savage beating to the blade runner. The dialogue here bears a great deal of weight:

LEON: How old am I?
DECKARD: I don’t know.
LEON: My birthday is April 10th, 2017. How long do I live?
DECKARD: Four years.
LEON: More than you. Painful to live in fear, isn’t it? Nothing is worse than having an itch you can’t scratch.
DECKARD: I agree.
LEON: Wake up – time to die.

Much of our sympathy for the replicants in this film relates to what we (and they) perceive as a deprivation: their genetically engineered four-year lifespan is far shorter than that which any human being can (barring accidents) rely upon, and it entails that they know from the first moment of their existence the precise date of their death. But Leon’s interrogation of Deckard puts this assumption in question: for his ability to kill the blade runner destroys the illusion that a normal human lifespan trumps one with replicant limitations – death cannot thus be kept at a Biblical arm’s length. Indeed, Leon here begins to emerge as a figure of real power as he names the moment of Deckard’s death; it is as if his knowledge of the specific day on which he will die allows him to master and turn to his own account our common fear of dying, whereas frail human beings can never be sure when their end will come. At just this point, however, our impression of replicant superiority is in turn exploded, for Rachel saves Deckard by shooting Leon in the head – thus proving that knowing the date on which one’s death is inevitable is not the same as knowing when one will die.

The moral is clear: mortal finitude is not reducible to the fact of our finite lifespan; it is rather constituted by the fact that every moment of human life is necessarily shadowed by the possibility of its own non-existence. Death is not an abstract or distant limit to life, an indeterminate but inevitable boundary to the succession of our days, but rather a presence in every moment of our existence. This is an idea Heidegger captures in his notion of human existence as Being-towards-death, where death is understood as the possibility of our own impossibility; and its emergence reveals the irrelevance of any distinction between replicants and human beings that is grounded on the length of their lifespans or the certainty with which they can predict an end to their lives on a given day. Both are alive and both possess consciousness; hence both will die, and both are conscious of that fact. Whether either will attain a grasp of its full significance is another question, but it is one that both face – which means that replicants stand in a human relationship towards death.
Roy Baty’s quest for Tyrell and his ability to extend the replicant lifespan thus appear as a denial rather than an acknowledgement of mortality; but it is only through his encounter with Tyrell that this is brought home to him. For Roy’s maker quickly dismisses the topic of the biomechanical limitations to extending replicant lifespan (‘All of this is academic’) and instead introduces the two central notions this film will advance as integral to any authentic acknowledgement of human mortality, when he says, ‘He who burns twice as brightly burns half as long. And you have burned so very very brightly, Roy. . . . Revel in your time.’

For Tyrell, the value or worth of Roy’s life is determined not by its length but by the intensity with which he experiences each moment of it – in other words (and again tracing out paths followed by Heidegger), by its manifestation of a specific attitude towards the temporality of his own existence. The transience of the present moment is taken not to show its insignificance but the nature of its significance – the fact that it is a moment in transition, always having been delivered from the future and always about to be delivered over to the past, and hence that human existence is always endless becoming. All human experience is present experience or it is nothing; hence to fail to engage with the present moment is to fail to engage with one’s life as such. But to engage properly with it means acknowledging that it is inextricably related to past and future; hence to live one’s life authentically is to let every moment burn brightly whilst (perhaps by) still acknowledging that each such moment will pass.

Tyrell talks of this as revelling in one’s time. This reference to revelry or play shows that the Nietzschean subtext of Alien is here re-emerging, but this time Scott is invoking Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, who speaks constantly of the overman (the self-overcoming human being, the individual who understands himself as essentially transitional) as one who dances through life with lightness and grace. The Heideggerian notion of authentic Being-towards-death, of living each moment to the full whilst respecting its essential transitoriness, is here interpreted as a matter of revelling in the possibilities of act and performance that the fact of embodied, finite existence makes possible.
Roy is dimly aware of this from the outset; it is why, when Pris recites the Cartesian dictum ‘I think therefore I am’ in Sebastian’s apartment, he responds by saying, ‘Very good, Pris – now show him why.’ But the Nietzschean connection Tyrell forges allows him to see that the true significance or point of the moments which make up one’s life should be generated from within that life rather than from a reliance upon external guarantors. For Zarathustra, the overman’s authenticity was underwritten by the doctrine of eternal recurrence: one had achieved a fully human life only if, when faced with the chance to have one’s life over again, one could sincerely desire that not a single moment within it should be changed. This vision is of life as a self-contained whole, its parts hanging together in utter self-sufficiency; and such a self-authenticating life could have no need for sources of value or worth external to itself.

Hence Nietzsche’s association of the overman with the death of God; for the Christian God is the traditional external guarantor of the worth of human life, and, insofar as His presence tempts us to refer the worth of our existence to him, His removal from the scene becomes an essential mark of human authenticity. Nietzsche narrates this removal as the murder of God by human beings in order to underline the need to accept full responsibility for what is involved in accepting full responsibility for our lives; and by enacting this narrative – by murdering his creator in a way which brings an anguished ‘Oh my God!’ from Sebastian – Roy proves that he has learnt the lesson Tyrell wished to teach him. In his final encounter with Deckard, he tries to pass on that lesson.

On one level, Roy’s pursuit of Deckard through the decaying Bradbury Building is motivated by revenge – for the latter’s execution of Pris and the other replicants; their memory is inscribed into Deckard’s body in the form of broken fingers. However, the hunt also displays Roy’s overman status – specifically in his having gone beyond what Nietzsche calls the ‘slave morality’ of good and evil (not beyond all morality – as Ash imagines of the alien – but beyond the specifically Christian moral code which contrasts good with evil rather than with badness). Thus, Roy characterizes Deckard as the representative of good (‘aren’t you the good man?’) and forces him to experience ‘what it is to be a slave’. The Christian
imagery which collects around Roy at this point (the nail through the palm, the frieze of cruciform ventilation units on the rooftop, the dove of peace) is not something he respects but something he toys with and turns to his own purposes (as in his use of the nail to slow the advance of his own impending death); he thereby casts himself as someone whose message is at least as important for humanity as Christ’s, declaring his status as the revaluator of all values.

Roy’s association of slavery with living in fear, thus echoing Leon’s earlier perception, also reminds us of the replicants’ perception of their own status in relation to their human creators; in part, his lesson is intended to teach Deckard what he, along with all human beings, is responsible for doing to the replicants – what his denial of their humanity amounts to. But, most fundamentally, it is designed to teach Deckard a lesson about his relation to death – about his mortality. Roy brings it about that Deckard feels that every moment may be his last, and Deckard’s response is to flee from this threat; he functions at the level of an injured animal, incapable of anything more than an unthinking attempt to avoid the threat of extinction. His pursuer, by contrast – who knows that his own death is equally imminent, whether by genetic determinism or by Deckard’s own efforts with gun and crowbar – responds to the threat by running towards it. He toys with the very threat that paralyses Deckard; he sees that, since mortality is as internal to human existence as embodiment, genuine humanity turns on finding the right relation to it.

We are thereby presented with inauthentic and authentic ways of living a human life in the face of its mortality. Deckard’s flight denies the ubiquity of this threat – as if an escape from Roy would amount to an escape from the threat he incarnates. Roy treats the same threat playfully. His mourning over Pris is transformed into a mock wolf-howl, an imitation of the huntsman’s pack which signals that the game of life and death is afoot; he describes firing on an unarmed man as ‘not very sporting’, his response to attack is to cry, ‘That’s the spirit!’ and, most importantly, he declares to Deckard, ‘You’d better get it up, or I’m going to have to kill you. Unless you’re alive, you can’t play, and if you can’t play ... ’
Like Zarathustra’s disciples, Roy is dancing on the edge of the abyss, performing his version of Pris’ cartwheeling enactment (in Sebastian’s apartment) of her thinking, embodied existence. The lightness and grace of his life find confirmation in his ability to look at death, and the death of love, without fear or hysteria. And he wants to teach this to Deckard: if to play is to be fully alive, not to play is to be reduced to death-in-life or merely animal existence. If you can’t play, you might as well be dead.

Deckard’s response to death is inauthentic because it transforms his own death from an (omnipresent) possibility into an actuality: it extinguishes his humanity. So Roy teaches him the difference between possibility and actuality; he allows Deckard (and us) to spend long minutes on the edge of his existence, pushes him to the edge of a real abyss, making death seem unavoidable – and then he rescues him. And he underlines the point of that lesson by making manifest, at the moment of his own death, that he has revelled in his time:

I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe: attack-ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion; I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.

He has lived each moment of his life to the full without denying its transitory place in the ineluctable stream of time; and any such denial would amount to denying the essential structure of human experience as such. It would, moreover, count as a further and more profound failure of acknowledgement to wish to bequeath one’s experiences and memories to others – as if one could outlive oneself, as if one’s moments of consciousness were alienable, as if one’s mortality could be sloughed off. Heidegger understands our relation to our own death as the clearest expression of this truth. He describes it as our ownmost, nonrelational possibility: no one can die another’s death for him, just as no one can die our death for us, and that is precisely what makes our death, when it comes, our ownmost possibility. Roy’s calm and moving last words manifest just this authentic understanding, and they cry out for acknowledgement as such.
It is Deckard upon whom the responsibility falls of responding to that cry. To acknowledge its significance is to acknowledge not just what it says, but the fact that these are Roy’s last words – part of his last moments, a testament to his life and to life as such. Deckard blinks, as if to clear his vision, and then provides Roy with an epitaph:

Maybe he loved life more than he ever had before. All he wanted were the same answers any of us want. ... All I could do was to sit there and watch him die.

Deckard sees not only that his tormentor’s nature is precisely the same as his own, but also that the only way in which to acknowledge his human mortality at the moment of its ending is to acknowledge that Roy’s death is his own – not to try hysterically to postpone it, or to try incoherently to take it upon himself, but to watch that death and watch it as the death of another human being, a human other. The authenticity of this acknowledgement shows that Deckard has learnt his lesson, about acknowledging others and about acknowledging mortality. As Inspector Gaff puts it, he has done a man’s job, the task of any genuine human being; and Roy’s bequest to Deckard culminates in the resurrection of Rachel. It’s a pity she won’t live – but, then again, who does?

**Excursus: the Director’s Cut**

If these ideas are true to the basic tenor of *Blade Runner*’s narrative, then it must be acknowledged that the alterations to the original theatrical release version embodied in the recent ‘Director’s Cut’ are at some distance from the deep sources of the film’s power. To be sure, it is good to see the removal of the hastily created, sunlit epilogue (in which Rachel is ‘revealed’ to have been given an ordinary human lifespan in order to create a happy ending which contradicts the whole thrust of the film’s thoughtfulness) and of the voice-over (despite its occasional touches of wit and poetry, and its overall confirmation that Scott is here once again fusing or hybridizing the science fiction genre – this time, with
that of Chandleresque film noir). But the sole significant addition — the restoration of a unicorn image within Deckard’s reverie at the piano — has commonly been taken as intended to answer a question whose relevance to the film’s central issues is itself questionable. For this inserted memory-image ensures that Gaff’s placing of an origami unicorn in Deckard’s apartment signifies the availability of a means of access to Deckard’s memories that (just like Deckard’s access to Rachel’s memories) is explicable only if Deckard is himself a replicant — thus giving a literal significance to Rachel’s sarcastic question about whether he has himself ever taken a V-K test. Since, however, the film itself places replicants and humans in exactly the same position with respect to its central questions (the acknowledgement of mortality and of one another), such an apparently momentous revelation about Deckard’s status makes precisely no difference to the trajectory and terminus of his education. We might therefore be better advised to think of this added scene or image as itself a test of its viewers’ capacity to acknowledge the film that frames it, by testing whether they recognize that it is the film’s central concern to shift our conception of its importance.

**Enframing and acknowledgement**

It is not, then, difficult to see *Blade Runner* as a continuation of the study that Ridley Scott began in *Alien* of the flesh-and-blood embodiedness of human beings, and of their attempts to repress (and to overcome their repression of) its conditions and consequences. In the earlier film, this study focuses on the reproductive drive of the flesh — upon its sexuality and generativity, and upon its subordination of individual integrity and autonomy to the demands of life as such. In the later film, it focuses on the internal relationship between life and death, on the body’s openness to its own mortality, and on the dependence of individual human flourishing upon acknowledging that fact, and upon one individual’s acknowledgement of and by others. A certain Nietzschean vision of human existence can be seen to hold this study together, as it moves from a conception of life as rapacious and devouring will-to-power, a Moloch to which the human
individual is sacrificed, to a conception of what the flourishing of a human life within such an ordering of the cosmos might look like.

This same background of ideas might also account for the vestigial presence of religious, and more specifically Christian, ideas in *Alien*: for *Blade Runner* appears to declare an investment in their overcoming, and many of Scott’s more recent films continue to explore variations upon that theme. *Gladiator* (2000), for example, with its resolutely pagan representation of a world in which human suffering is ultimately beyond redemption, might be seen as one culmination of Scott’s desire to imagine a human form of life unpolluted by essentially Christian thought; whereas *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) attends rather to the various ways in which medieval Christendom was always already polluted by essentially un-Christian political, moral and erotic realities, and inherently ready to impose itself (with all its corruptions) upon cultures hitherto resistant to it. *Black Hawk Down* (2001) can then be viewed as a study of the contemporary West as essentially post-Christian – a culture inexorably returning to a pagan worldview but indelibly marked by the religious perspective it appears to have abandoned.

For the secular liberal humanitarian ideology underlying the military intervention it records manifests a compassion for suffering distinctive of Christian slave morality, as well as its missionary impulse to convert other cultures to its conceptions of good and evil; and the warrior ethos it depicts – with its basic structure of mutuality in the face of shattered bone and torn flesh, the irreducible minimum of the human – marries Crusader values with those of Roman stoicism, in a manner exemplified by the American armed forces’ obdurate, self-defining refusal to abandon any of its soldiers to the mercies of the enemy.

As the obsessive interest shown by all three of these later films in the machinery of warfare would suggest, another central theme in Scott’s specifically science-fictional universes is technology – and, more specifically, its impact on human forms of life. Indeed, the physical and spiritual landscape of *Blade Runner* is very similar to the microcosm of human life manifest in the *Nostromo*: the remnants of humanity left behind by the off-world settlers find themselves in a world without sunlight, and dwarfed by
their own technological achievements. Like Ash, the replicants incarnate the threat of technology coming to control its creators; their presence on Earth demands an extremity of hostile response, as if they instantiate a threat to the very essence of what remains of humanity. And yet that feared future, of human fusion with or absorption into the technological, is already manifest in the children of Earth – in the low hiss of wheels as a swarm of them glide by on their bikes, in the jabbering city-speak arguments they have over machinery stolen from vehicles, in the distorting layers of material wrapped around their small heads and bodies.

Heidegger would recognize this as the landscape of what he called ‘the age of technology’. Such an age treats the natural world as a store of resources and raw materials for human purposes (rivers as hydroelectric power sources, forests as a standing reserve of paper, the wind as currents of potential energy) – a perspective that is extended to the cosmos as a whole in Scott’s vision of off-world mining and of the Nostromo’s general and specific purposes (to recover mineral ore from the other end of the universe, and to requisition an alien species as a weapon). Heidegger contrasted this attitude with that of acknowledging and respecting nature as a field of objects, forces and living beings each with their own specific essence or Being, to the comprehension of which the Being of human beings was uniquely attuned.

Heidegger’s preferred term for the destructive grasp of nature as standing reserve is ‘enframing’ – a term which is likely to recall any film-maker to the fact that his own artistic medium is more dependent than any other upon technology. The material basis of film is the recording capacity of the camera – the automatic production of an image of the world exhibited before the camera, and its consequent reproduction and projection on screen. Since this photographic basis of cinema seems to satisfy one of mankind’s perennial fantasies – that of recording the world without the mediation of human subjectivity – it is not difficult to imagine that the technological basis of film might inherently tend towards the elimination of the human. Since, however, every film director’s role is precisely to take responsibility for enframing the world, for meaning the composition and exclusion constituted by each frame in her film, her attempts to utilize the camera for artistic
purposes can be seen as an attempt to find a possibility of human flourishing within the heart of the humanly threatening age of technology – to subvert that threat from within.

We might reasonably expect these issues to come to a head when the camera is directed to frame human beings. When a human being is placed before the camera, what is consequently projected on screen is plainly related to its human origin, but it is equally plainly not identical with it. A photograph of an object is not the object itself, but what we see in the photograph is surely the object photographed; certainly, it is far from easy to identify any specific respect in which the two differ (to name any feature lacked or possessed by one in comparison with the other). Hence, the question: is the humanity of the camera’s subject preserved or distorted or destroyed by its cinematic transcription or transformation? What, in short, becomes of human beings on film?

It is not difficult to see that this question is internal to Blade Runner – that this film in part takes the condition of film as its subject. The theme is announced in its opening sequence, in which the camera’s long journey over the cityscape to the Tyrell Corporation building is intercut with close-ups of an unblinking, all-seeing eye; and an eye in which what is on screen is reflected but which is identified with no character in the world of the film can only be the eye through which the viewer sees that world – the eye of the camera and its director.

A further identification between the director of this film and Deckard is established when the blade runner is shown sitting in a darkened room observing photographs of the replicants and a recording of Leon’s execution of another blade runner projected on a screen before him. It is confirmed by his use of the television set in his apartment to analyse a photograph of Zhora’s apartment, when he is shown calling for close-ups and tracking shots within the photographed room (quite as if he were within the room itself). It is all but declared by his professional association with the Voight-Kampff machine – an obvious surrogate for the camera. And, of course, what he gazes at through this machine’s viewfinder are the faces of replicants – human replicas, humanlike beings whose humanness is under suspicion, to be discovered or deemed absent by the gaze of the camera.
Does this association suggest that the attentions of the camera are lethal to human subjects? Or does it rather suggest that the camera – perhaps precisely because of its refusal of human subjectivity – is as capable of confirming the humanity of those placed before it as of denying it? Since Blade Runner shows its surrogate director as viewing things along the barrel of his gun at least as often as through the V-K machine, we might say that it equates the camera with a death-dealing piece of technology. Even here, however, at the end, the film discriminates between what Deckard’s gun can do and what it actually does. For all his retirements of the other replicants, when he returns to Rachel in his apartment he initiates her resurrection by removing her shroud with his gun. This tells us that – although the camera (like a gun) has an inherent capacity to deny humanity, it is capable of being used to acknowledge and affirm it. What matters is the manner in which it is used.

Just as, within the world of the film, the flourishing of any given person’s humanity requires its acknowledgement by her others, so the flourishing of the humanity of anyone placed before the camera’s gaze is determined not by its technological basis but by the use to which it is put by the director employing it. He can either transform subjects into what replicants are thought to be, simulacra of humanity; or he can actualize and preserve their subjectivity, as Deckard learns to do with Rachel. Hence, any failure of acknowledgement in a film is the director’s responsibility, a failure of his or her own humanity; and whether or not he or she will succeed or fail in this respect cannot be predicted apart from an assessment of each film he or she makes. Even when a director succeeds, however, that success can as easily be denied as acknowledged by a film’s viewers – by, for example, their assuming in advance that the film is merely a generic exercise, or just another Hollywood blockbuster.

Alien is, I would say, rather less interested in these questions about the nature of film than is Blade Runner. But it offers one internal representation of an issue that is central to any understanding of cinema as a medium, that is recognizably related to the reflexive issues addressed in Blade Runner, and that is powerfully determinative of the future development of the Alien universe. For
one aspect of the mysterious transformative powers of the camera upon embodied human subjects is the unpredictable but ungainsayable way in which its gaze can make some actors into stars and ensure that others never attain that state – in which it allows physiognomy to become destiny. And the gradual, essentially unpredictable but obscurely satisfying emergence from the Nostromo’s crew of Ripley as the main human protagonist and hero of Alien is at once the cause and a mythical representation of Sigourney Weaver’s translation (by means of the complex interaction of her as yet relatively unformed but already distinctive physiognomy with her character and its vicissitudes under the gaze of Ridley Scott’s camera) into stardom. The other films in the Alien series will become increasingly obsessed with giving an account of this unaccountable, precarious but undeniable phenomenon.