

"Stasis Interrupted": Christianity and Subjectivity in David Fincher's *Alien*³

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The representation of technology in *Alien*³ (David Fincher, 1992) is what immediately distinguishes this film from its predecessors. Stephen Mulhall suggests, in his detailed analysis of the series, that the opening act of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) presents us with a "picture of human origination that represses its creatureliness, that represents parturition as an automated function of technology rather than of flesh emerging noisily and painfully from flesh," a "displacement of reality" marked "not by dream but by fantasy."¹ This fantasy, which tends to duly repress the fragility (if not the messiness) of our fleshly existence, is brought into sharp contrast with the alien's monstrosity, which functions as a kind of "return of the repressed," bringing to the surface "human fantasies and fears about human embodiment or animality," which express the 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 own 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 nonetheless 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.²

In the first place, then, David Fincher's repetitious use in *Alien³* of diagnostic imaging reminiscent of ultrasound technology—both in the opening minutes of the film, and again at the crucial moment when the alien is discovered to be gestating inside Ripley—is one of the most profound ways in which the film serves as a counterpoint to *Alien* (1979). Technology—so essential both to *Alien*, where it is conceived of as a kind of “protective outer shell,” a barrier between civilization and animality, and *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), where its destructive power allows us to defend ourselves from the alien’s parasitic, organic drive to colonize the body—no longer functions as an augmentation or extension of the human skin as a barrier between the organism and the individual, but penetrates these surfaces, allowing us to unobtrusively peer inside (ourselves), and this not only brings into sharp relief this repressed, organic side of our being, but forces us to reimagine what it means to be human. How, we might ask, do we rationalize the idea of having a soul after radioscopy?

If the first two films each involve a variation on the theme of escape from the (ultimately unavoidable) organic dimension of our being into fantasies (perhaps, of femininity, if not of heroic transcendence), then *Alien³* would seem, at least schematically, to suggest not only that there is no escape from this organic dimension (it is there, inside all of us, and we have photographic proof), but that we must find a way to live (meaningfully) with it. Christianity, interestingly enough, the religion of the “word made flesh,” enters into the film not as foil to this hyperrational world that seems to have embraced science and the materiality (almost) to its limit, but as an attempt to reconcile the organism with its fantasies about itself, the limit against which the previous films continually bump up.

In a second variation on the theme of technology that runs throughout the series, the *mise-en-scène* of *Alien³* is distinctively marked by technology in decay: with rubbish heaps filled with wires and the muddy, grimy remains of Bishop; CCTV cameras that no longer work; the messy, bug-infested foundry, where lead is forged into the lining of toxic waste containers; and so on. Here, among all of this waste and ruin, we glimpse the inversion of another fantasy, which the newness and excitement of technology tends to propagate: that it is timeless and immortal, that it transcends us. Yet, in the rubbish heap we find we have more in common with technology than we might at first realize: It is as mortal as we are and as susceptible to the passage of time and obsolescence as our own bodies. The difference would appear to lie in the fact that the decaying technologies that populate this *mise-en-scène* don’t seem to biodegrade so readily. However, as we shall examine in more detail in what follows, perhaps it is more to the point that in death, technologies become inert matter whose material presence poses a problem only for the logistics of waste disposal, while in contrast, the

human sometimes has a peculiar ability, whatever one's religious (or non-religious) conviction, to continue to live after death, as neither flesh nor soul but as word. So it is that Fincher's poorly received third installment of the series, upon closer examination, cleverly turns the series inside out.

An Anatomy of Cinematic Fantasy

Fincher opens the film with a declaration of war on James Cameron's popular contribution to the *Alien* series. In the opening minutes of *Alien³*, we witness a sequence of events that leads to the demise of Ripley's (Sigourney Weaver) surrogate family—consisting of the child, Newt, and the "husband," Hicks—overlaid with the affectless voice of the computer announcing, rather presciently, "stasis interrupted." *Aliens* culminates in a "fairy tale ending" (one of Cameron's "marines," Vasquez, even refers to Ripley as "Snow White") in which the family unit not only escapes but is strongly constituted through the harrowing events of the film, drifting off into the vastness of space in order to live "happily ever after" (an ending not inconsistent with the bulk of Cameron's work, from *Terminator* and its sequel to *Titanic* and, more recently, *Avatar*). As the final exchange between Newt and Ripley suggests at the end of *Aliens*, it is now safe to dream and to sleep soundly, the hero having vanquished the monster.

Such is the cinematic logic that is bequeathed to Fincher. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that he was bequeathed a particular brand of cinematic fantasy that ran at odds with his own and that he methodically dismantled, dissecting it just as Clemens, Fiorina "Fury" 161's medical officer, cuts through Newt's bones on the autopsy table so that Ripley can be convinced that the monster doesn't lurk beneath the flesh. As Stephen Mulhall puts it:

Fincher . . . deprives himself of resources that one might hitherto have considered essential to the repertoire of any director working with this material—the capacity to maintain suspense or to generate narrative drive, the ability to manipulate the audience's desire to know what will happen next, to make the fate of one's protagonist appear to hang on the twists and turns of a plot. Fincher's relationship with his audience must, accordingly, differ radically from that of his predecessors—particularly James Cameron; by so forcefully refusing to satisfy the expectations we bring to his film, he forces on us (and upon himself) the question of what satisfactions we might hope for from a film from which hope has been so quickly and decisively excised.³

In this way, and foremost at a metatextual level, the film itself occupies the place of the "stasis interrupted," announced in its opening minutes: interrupting, that is, the "stasis" of cinematic convention, within which our

position as spectator is safely manipulated according to the expectation that the hero will satisfactorily triumph in the end. The opening sequence of *Alien*³ declares Fincher's refusal of these "familiar cinematic pleasures"⁴ in part, no doubt, because creative play with cinematic convention is characteristic of his own—and, vis-à-vis Cameron, diametrically opposed and reflexive—view of what cinema can (and should) offer its viewer; but also owing to a certain structural necessity regarding the continuation of the series.

On the face of it, the ending of *Aliens* leaves very little room for extending Ripley's story into a third installment. The planet is destroyed in an enormous nuclear explosion caused by a damaged power station, the alien queen is expunged from an airlock (a conscious repetition, no doubt, of the alien's fate in the first film), and the newly constituted family is sleeping soundly as they make their way back to earth. Cameron's characteristic way of delivering to his viewers the pleasure of seeing Ripley rewarded for her harrowing experience brings with it—perhaps somewhat paradoxically—absolute narrative closure. We could easily imagine that, if the third film were to involve Ripley and not reject the ending of *Aliens*, we might be left with a psychological drama involving a woman trying to learn how to love her newfound family—in the wake of her biological family having died during the 50-year span in which Ripley was drifting alone in space between *Alien* and *Aliens*—while trying to manage the residual psychical trauma from the previous two installments. Cracks begin to appear in Cameron's decidedly fairy talelike ending as soon as one begins to dwell too long on the horror that Ripley has been subjected to over the previous two films: How could her memories not haunt her once the adrenaline wears off? No wonder, then, that the story development for a third installment of the *Alien* series was itself fraught with rewrites, some going so far as to dispense with Ripley altogether. At least two other directors had abandoned the project before Fincher took it on, and the story itself went through so many changes that by the time Fincher had started filming, he was doing so without a finished script.

Vincent Ward developed one of the more promising ideas, which he was slated to direct, involving Ripley crash-landing on a small, labyrinthine wooden planet that housed a small monastic community. According to a 2011 interview with Vincent Ward from *Empire* magazine, Ward seems concerned less with another story of "escape" from death at the hands of the alien and more with the psychological consequences of Ripley's previous struggles:

He was particularly taken by Cameron's idea, seen in the *Aliens* Special Edition that Ripley had a daughter who had died of old age. Though he was keen to be rid of the surrogate-daughter figure of Newt ("One of the first things I wanted to do was kill her off. She kind of annoyed

me," he laughs), he wanted to place at the thematic heart of *Alien III* the idea of Ripley searching for family. "You can't keep living your life fighting creatures without much of a family," he says. "How would you survive? Families give us something. We're communal, social creatures. So Ripley's big regret is that she missed out on a personal life. She seeks some sort of strange atonement for not having had a relationship with her daughter."⁵

Significantly, Ward's story—which was ultimately incorporated into the final version of the film via an idea involving a prison colony scripted by David Twohy during the story's labored incubation stage—accords in many respects with what I see as the film's only plausible next step: In finding herself marooned upon such a planet, populated by monks, Ward externalizes Ripley's psychological struggle with the alien.

Replacing Ward's monks with Twohy's prisoners, such that the prisoners have freely chosen to separate themselves from the world and to form a monastic community, adds another turn of the screw: a decidedly more "worldly" meditation on the difference between human beings and the alien. After all, we learn that the prisoners are "murderers and rapists of women," a description not unlike one that can be applied to the alien itself, except that the prisoners are accountable to the human universe of morality. The horror that the alien instills in us is obviously exempt from such moral considerations insofar as its killing and "raping"—that is, the impregnating of its host via the "facehugger"—follows only a biological imperative to self-preservation and reproduction; as the android character Ash tells us in the first film, he admires the alien for its "purity," free of any "delusions of morality" (*Alien*, 1979). By juxtaposing the alien with "rapists and murders," the film tries subtly to bring out the minimal difference that separates the fear that the alien's presence provokes from the monstrous human capacity (if not propensity) for evil. I say the film tries precisely because it is not immediately clear if it is successful in this supposed aim. Fincher himself recognizes that the film walks a very delicate line:

Alien³ takes place in a prison, it was supposed to be about the wretched of the world. The other ones had heroic marines or those unsuspecting truck drivers in outer space. We thought, "Here are the fucking wretched, nobody cares if these people live or die." The task was to make people care and think, "Hold on, we have a duty to everyone," but it didn't really work. We failed to give people the broad, safe environment that, in the United States at least, they seem to want. They want to go to the cinema and get away from it all. We tried to bring it down to right here and now, and I just think in terms of the world box-office we may have chosen wrong. If we failed to do one thing in

this film, and we failed to do many things, it was to take people out of their everyday lives. It's not a scare movie but a queasy scare movie and I think people resent that.⁶

Here he corroborates our earlier claim that *Alien³* "interrupts" the very conventions that seemed to make Cameron's *Aliens* so successful, namely, the triumph of the hero over the imminent threat of death posed by the alien and a story populated with (morally) "good" protagonists who are easy to identify with and feel some investment in. Here we should locate the most fundamental break with the *Alien* universe accomplished by Fincher: For the first time in the series, he makes the film not about life—or, more specifically, the triumph of life over death—but about living with (the inevitability of) death. In confronting us with the inevitability of death, *Alien³* foregrounds what is ultimately the most important aspect of the motif of "stasis interrupted"—knowing we are going to die is a fundamental aspect of human experience. Death "interrupts" the "stasis" of life, imbuing it with a meaning and urgency that makes life worth living. Put another way, "death" and "life" cannot be considered apart from one another: Death is not simply a negation or corruption of life from which it is life's necessary aim to escape. We can detect in the driving force of the plot of both *Alien* and (to a larger extent) *Aliens* a simplistic organization of morality according to the polarized opposition of life (good) and death (bad): The triumph over the alien is thus, at its most general, a triumph over death. By bringing death into proximity with life, *Alien³* examines the background out of which morality emerges.

It might be tempting at this point to read the film as involved in a straightforward existential position, or, along the lines of Ted Billy's 1995 article, "'This Whole Place is a Basement': The Gnostic/Existentialist Vision of *Alien³*" as a kind of Gnostic infused existentialism; but what if Christianity itself is deeply concerned with this existential position and that this focus on Gnosticism obscures the existential problem at the heart of Christianity? In this sense, Gnosticism constitutes a kind of "grand" mythology that explains the origins of sin and the path to redemption; but Christianity reveals an existential dilemma at the core of the human relationship to the world. Slavoj Žižek, for one, notes that "'death' and 'life' designate for Saint Paul two existential (subjective) positions, not 'objective' facts," which prompts him to ask, in a way that gets directly at the core of what we are concerned with here, "[w]hat if we are 'really alive' only if and when we engage ourselves with an excessive intensity which puts us beyond 'mere life'? What if, when we focus on mere survival, even if it is qualified as 'having a good time,' what we ultimately lose is life itself?"⁷

These questions are deeply bound up with how *Alien³*, profoundly disrupts the theme of survival as an apparently self-evident, moral end in itself developed over *Alien* and *Aliens*, Cameron's sequel being, at its most

basic, a mere "repetition" (albeit on a "grander" scale) of the fight for survival against a formidable, external enemy. Over the course of the first two films, self-preservation is the ultimate motivation for the characters, and it is, we might add, the main strategy by which the films induce horror in us, the viewers. Both films play on the sense of fear, horror, and (to an extent) indignation provoked by displaying the gruesome and painful death of characters with whom we are more or less positively identified. In essence, the first two films play with our fear of death, particularly the fear of a painful and gruesome death that disfigures the body, bursting it asunder, and, importantly, our spontaneous inclination toward avoiding death—this ineluctable and inexplicable urge to survive. In precisely this way "life" and "death" are presented as "objective facts."

Here, then, the thematic implications of the decision to populate the setting of *Alien³*, the planet Fiorina 161, with prisoners comes into clearer focus. Whereas the triumph of life over death guided by the sheer will to survive ultimately held the previous two films together, *Alien³* confronts the meaninglessness of survival for the sake of self-preservation directly, as if this biological imperative that takes over our entire existence when we are in the midst of an immediate threat of death is where we ultimately betray our fleshly selves. The prisoners on Fiorina 161, the so-called "wretched of the world," have no real reason to live, nothing to live for, and, moreover, we, the audience, have no obvious reason to care whether or not they do. In this way, Fincher strips away the features of character that lend a sense of urgency to their actions and that we might use to establish a sense of rapport. From this "zero level," the film meditates on the question of how life comes to be invested with meaning and purpose when, no matter what, it takes place under the shadow the inevitability of death.

The key to understanding *Alien³* consists in how it stages a series of disruptions along the lines of the relationship between a totality and its (constitutive) exception: death as the exception to life; the criminal as exception to the totality of humanity; the "pure" biological, organic, fleshly substance represented by the alien as the exception to the human "spirit"; up to and including woman (Ripley) as the exception introduced into and thereby disrupting the unity of the male, homosocial totality of which the population of Fiorina 161 is composed. In each case the exception, when brought into proximity to these preestablished (fantasmatic) totalities, constitutes a threat to their harmony and consistency forcing us to confront how these totalities depend for their consistency and unity on the disavowal of the exception.

This logic of totality and its constitutive exception partakes of the more general problematic of the relationship between the human subject and its reality *qua* (external) world. In other words, it is reflective of the inscription of the subject into the social, akin to the (Christian) "spiritual" dimension of human being. From the point of view of the (human) subject, the social

comprises the totality of elements—that is, the discursive universe, comprising signifiers—with which we symbolize and thereby establish a meaningful relationship to the world. The problem of the exception is here encountered as a relation between the self and the limit of its symbolic universe qua radical otherness. How does one symbolize, represent, or take account of, that which does not have a representative within this order? Again and again this problem is staged throughout *Alien*³, hinted at from its very beginnings in the aforementioned drone of the escape pod's computer, announcing, "stasis interrupted."

The "Sin Which Dwells Within Me," or, The Prisoners' Dilemma I

A properly ethical dimension emerges by positioning death within the domain of human experience that aligns with the Christian ethical responsibility to love one's neighbor, which counts—we might even say that it only truly counts—even when we have no good reason to otherwise care about the other. The prisoners confront us with the Christian notion of agapē, which has to do with God's universal love of humankind, a love characteristically deprived of any self-interest and for which God sacrifices Christ, his son, to redeem humankind of sin.

Such a love is encapsulated in John 3:16, which reads, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." It is this notion of universal love—love for the whole of humankind, including those elements we would sooner exclude—with which the prisoners confront us, as viewers, since we are hard pressed to find any immediate sympathy with them and yet they have just as much a claim to the totality of humankind as the hapless "truckers in space" from *Alien* or the heroic "marines" from *Aliens*. Fincher's avowed task with *Alien*³, to "make people care and think, 'Hold on, we have a duty to everyone,'" partakes of this notion of universal love without exception. The difficulty of this task—owing to a great extent to the fact that it flies in the face of the conventions of popular cinema exemplified most forcefully in Cameron's *Aliens*—might account for why Ted Billy, while admirably confronting head-on the religious thematic of the film,⁸ oscillates between Gnosticism and existentialism. By reading the film through such a framework, he safely maintains the exceptional status of the prisoners vis-à-vis the "good" Ripley and, by extension, the "falsely" universal humankind constituted through the "excommunication" of its undesirable or "unworthy" element.

Most importantly, this oscillation, or rather, imposed choice between Gnosticism and existentialism, concerns the ambiguous status of redemption.

Regarding the relationship between redemption and *agapē*, Slavoj Žižek notes that a problem emerges:

the moment we comprehend this 'giving of his one and only Son'—the death of Christ—as a sacrificial gesture in the exchange between God and man. If we claim that, by sacrificing that which is most precious to him, his own son, God redeems humanity, ransoming its sins, then there are ultimately only two ways to explain this act: either God himself demands this retribution—that is to say, Christ sacrifices himself as the representative of humanity to satisfy the retributive need of God his father—or God is not omnipotent—that is to say, he is subordinated to a higher Destiny, like a Greek tragic hero: his act of creation, like the fateful deed of a Greek hero, brings about dire unwanted consequences, and the only way for him to re-establish the balance of Justice is to sacrifice what is most precious to him, his own Son—in this sense, God himself is the ultimate Abraham. The fundamental problem of Christology is how to avoid these two readings of Christ's sacrifice which impose themselves as obvious.⁹

Why do these two readings present such a "fundamental problem"? The first reading elides the important question of why God demanded such retribution for sin—why, in other words, God has any *need* for such retribution. Here, he appears to be subject to some pathological whim, a capricious desire to exact punishment. Why does he not just simply forgive us? Why must Christ be put through such an excruciating death first? In the second reading, he is inexplicably accountable to some "higher" authority: a Beyond to which God is somehow necessarily accountable. Thus, in both cases, we are left with questions: Why must we be redeemed and to what end?

Of course, Gnosticism poses a decidedly unsatisfactory answer: The world is apparently an *a priori* fallen one, which separates "humanity from divinity," insisting on "God's position outside the known cosmos to such a degree that they even referred to God as the 'alien,' and also as the 'alien Life,' to emphasize His otherness in contrast to the mundane world that they viewed as a prisonhouse [sic]."¹⁰ Here, Billy suggests a connection between the prison setting of *Alien*³ and the Gnostic view of the world as a "prison house" insofar as the "Gnostics considered creation a cosmic aberration brought about when the female part of God known as Sophia (i.e., wisdom) attempts to know the unknowable and falls out of the God-head, leading to the creation of the cosmos and mankind. This marks the descent of God into material form, a Gnostic image that is quite similar to the movement of Ripley's space pod just before it strikes Fiorina 161."¹¹ A superficial connection is established here between Ripley's fall to the

prison planet from the "cosmos" in the escape pod. However, there is another way to read this "fall," one that is, moreover, more consistent with how the previous films inscribe the cosmos into their universe of meaning.

Insofar as this notion of *agapē* emerges out of the choice to populate the *Alien*³ universe with prisoners, we must categorically insist on reading this film against any possibility that the film has anything in common with Gnosticism. Against this Gnostic obscurantism, we can read the "fall" in the sense of Heidegger's notion of *Geworfenheit*, of "being-thrown" into a concrete historical situation." As Žižek puts it:

Geworfenheit is to be opposed both to standard humanism and to the Gnostic tradition. In the humanist vision, a human being belongs to this earth, he should be fully at home on its surface, able to realize his potential through an active, productive exchange with it . . . Any notion that we do not belong to this earth, that earth is a fallen universe, a prison for striving to liberate itself from material inertia, is dismissed as life-denying alienation. For the Gnostic tradition, on the other hand, the human Self is not created, it is a preexisting soul thrown into a foreign and inhospitable environment. The pain of our daily lives is the result not of our sin (Adam's fall), but of the fundamental glitch in the structure of the material universe itself which was created by defective demons; consequently, the path of salvation lies not in overcoming our sins, but in overcoming our ignorance: in transcending the world of material appearances by achieving true Knowledge—What both these positions share is the notion that there is a home, a "natural" place, for man: either the realm of the "noosphere" from which we fell into this world and for which our souls long, or earth itself. Heidegger shows us the way out of this predicament: what if we are in effect 'thrown' into this world, never fully at home in it, always dislocated, "out of joint," in it, and what if this dislocation is our constitutive, primordial condition, the very horizon of our being? What if there is no previous "home" out of which we were thrown into this world, what if this very dislocation grounds man's exstatic opening to the world?¹²

Thus we can view Ripley's crash-landing onto Fiorina 161 in a much more consistent way by seeing it not as a Gnostic "fall from the Godhead" but rather as her "being-thrown" into a "concrete situation." Such a reading, in the first place, has the advantage of not adding things to the narrative in order to fit our "theoretical frame": After all, if we are to build a consistent case for the connection between Ripley and Sophia (i.e., wisdom), from what state of divine plentitude or transcendence is she supposed to have fallen from?¹³ Moreover, as we have been arguing, it goes against the most radical thematic of the entire film to suggest that Fiorina 161 is a "fallen

world": it may be a (purposely) "forgotten" world from the point of view of the inhabitants of earth, but in order to understand the message of the film and place of Christianity within it, it is crucial to insist that Fiorina 161 is as much "home" as any other (i.e., earth).

The Sin Which Therefore I Am Not, or, The Prisoners' Dilemma II

Where, then, does love fit into this? We should here consider the tension between the Law (God's law, the Law handed down to Moses on Mount Sinai) and Love, apropos of Saint Paul's epistle to the Romans. In the first place, Romans 7:5-11, which reads:

For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had no known sin, but by the law: for I had no known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without law sin was dead. For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me.

Paul's solution is to replace this Old Testament law—which by manifesting itself in the form of a prohibition allows sin to take "occasion by [its] commandment[s]" to deceive—by the love one one's neighbor, which is notable for taking the form of an affirmation. In Romans 13:8–10, Paul gives a particularly salient expression to it:

Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

In *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Alain Badiou considers the distinction that Saint Paul makes here as between a "legalizing subjectivation, which is a power of death, and a law raised up by faith, which belongs to the spirit and to life."¹⁴ The whole problematic of the instating of universal love (*agapē*) as law turns on this difference between an affirmation and a

prohibition. The Old Testament law affirms sin in the very act of naming the prohibition. Sin is inscribed in the letter of the prohibition. By telling you what *not* to do, it imposes a split between thinking and doing, spirit and flesh: You are to do (flesh) the opposite of what, in coming to understand the law (for example, "Thou shall not kill") you are led to think (spirit). This is how we should read Badiou's assertion that love "names a nonliteral law, one that gives to the faithful subject his consistency."¹⁵ By subsuming the law under a single affirmation ("Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"), the subject "redisCOVERS the living unity of thinking and doing."¹⁶

In what follows, we will consider how the prisoners conceive of themselves in relation to the law as prohibition, wholly identifying with their status as criminals/sinners and thereby split along these same lines between thinking/spirit (sin/criminality) and doing/flesh (their work in the prison while waiting for redemption/death). It is in this way that, to begin with, they occupy the existential/subjective position of "death."

We should recall in the first place the group's decision to stay behind on the planet after most of the prisoners were transferred out. In the words of Dillon, the inmates' *de facto* leader, they "have a good place to wait here and until now no temptation." That Dillon reminds Ripley that she "doesn't want to know" him, for he (along with his fellow inmates) is a "murderer and rapist of women" suggests the extent to which the inmates have identified themselves with the Law: The fact and monstrosity of their crimes seems to permeate the entirety of their being, right up to the fear that somehow Ripley's presence among them might by nothing more than her proximity to them, force them to victimize her.

Thus the prisoners, upon hearing of Ripley's unexpected (not to say accidental) arrival, are stricken with a deep xenophobia, a decisive lack of hospitality toward the otherness that Ripley unwittingly represents. Upon learning that a woman has crash-landed on the planet and is under the care of the prison doctor, Morse is quick to complain that he has "taken a vow of celibacy, [which] includes women." Dillon interjects on Morse's behalf, clarifying that "we view the presence of any outsider, especially a woman, as a violation of the harmony and potential break in the spiritual unity." Such is the fundamental way by which we discern that the inmates have fully identified themselves with the Law insofar as, through their actions, they confuse their exceptional status vis-à-vis "humanity"—for it is their status as "exception" that keeps them locked away in a prison—with some kind of "essence;" as though a prisoner is not "human," as we are apt to believe, but rather—and particularly as "murderers and rapists of women"—a "monster," inhuman, outside of all that "true" humanity aspires to be. There exists here a short circuit between the inmates' status

as sinners and what that says about their innermost *being*: They assume incorrectly that they sin because they are sinners, rather than the other way around. The entire ethical problem of the film consists in restoring the "proper" relation between sinful deeds and one's status as a sinner. This "proper" relation is precisely, on the contrary, that *we are sinners because we sin*. Turning around the relation between the sin and the sinner restores to this relation the necessary and essential possibility opened up by free will.

In turn, this necessary dimension of free will changes our very understanding of history, particularly the way in which the personal histories of the inmates themselves, the presumably long litany of their sinful deeds by which, for example, Dillon feels authorized to directly identify with being a "murderer and rapist of women," exerts a decidedly oppressive presence upon the colony's relation to Ripley, present in every covetous glance and the heavy silence that falls upon the prisoners when Ripley enters, for the first time, the cafeteria to thank Dillon for his words at Newt's and Hicks's funeral. The major question that is opened up here is perhaps, *to what extent does our past make "us" who we "are"?* To be sure, the prisoners aren't the only ones in need of grappling with this problem. Ripley's history, too, is fraught with loss, with violent death, with outliving her own daughter (who, as we learn in the director's cut of *Aliens*, died of old age while Ripley was drifting through space in suspended animation). All of this, of course, to say nothing of her gradual realization that an alien "queen" grows inside her, harboring a death from which there will be no escape: a telling metaphor for our own past, that patchwork of memories and emotions that seemingly "inhabits" and grows within us and from which we cannot escape. It might be going too far to say that it directly determines our fate—for this is, as I have just stated above, the major question around which the narrative crystallizes—but we are certainly forced to confront the very meaning of fate: Rather than directly determining our *being*, that is, the essence of "who" we "are," the relation to our past shapes our spontaneous relationship to the world, forcing us to make decisions on how to live within a framework determined by our past; our past history is the "stuff" we must carry, and must learn to live with and to overcome one way or another.

No wonder, then, that in a (tragically) deleted scene from the theatrical cut of *Alien*³, Ripley's dialogue in the cafeteria with Dillon is meaningfully extended. After Dillon tells Ripley that the inmates have had, until her arrival, a "good place to wait," she immediately seizes upon and earnestly confronts Dillon with the question, "What are you waiting for?" Time suddenly stands still here for a moment, as the inmates exchange bemused glances and Dillon guffaws. Notably, David (Pete Postlethwaite) looks intrigued by the question but glances furtively at Dillon as though waiting

for his lead. Dillon looks back at David, laughs, and says, as though he only half-believes it—the key here is that the tone and delivery of his answer is profoundly ambiguous—“Why, we’re waiting for God to return and raise his servants to redemption.” All the while, Ripley listens with attentiveness and care, neither laughing with him or at him. Dillon’s delivery here, of his answer to the question, “What are you waiting for?” is almost sarcastic, coming shortly after he earnestly suggests that, although tells him that she does not have much faith, there is “enough faith” among the prisoners “even for [her],” the “intolerable.” In spite of his purported faith, he seems to suggest, there is little hope for redemption. Ultimately, however, we do get the sense that if Dillon is waiting for anything, he is merely waiting for death, safely excluded from the world in which his past deeds have branded him as a sinner.

The fundamental problem here is that Dillon’s cynical distance, betrayed by his gestures and intonation, does not speak to a “subjectivization” of his history or his faith.¹⁷ It remains, as such, as alien to him as Ripley or the eponymous alien (although each of these important reference points, as we shall see, serve different purposes vis-à-vis coming to terms with one’s faith). To be sure, Dillon does not wholly lack conviction, and in this regard it is significant that the scene we have just detailed follows directly from Ripley approaching him in order to thank him for the speech that he gave at the “funeral” for her companions, killed in the crash landing. His speech was heartfelt and affecting, mobilizing his conviction and charisma: In an word, one catches a brief glimpse of the Love that he is capable of; a shocking contrast to his response to Ripley’s gratitude, the aggressive warning that Ripley “doesn’t want to know” him, that he is a “murderer and rapist of women.”

This contrast provides us with a particularly salient expression of the tension between Law and Love in terms of an opposition between sin and redemption (grace), the latter opposition forming what we might call the or “subjectivization” of Law and Love, respectively. While Dillon’s attitude toward Ripley in the cafeteria is apparently borne out of equating his history with his very *being*, his speech at the funeral seems to attest otherwise: Here, these two “sides” of Dillon (one composed of his identity vis-à-vis the Law; the other displaying that he is capable, at some level, of Love in the sense of *agapē*) are very much at odds. The key difference between Dillon’s contrasting attitudes consists in their respective “addressees”: His funeral oration was not in any way directed at Ripley. On the contrary, his words circle around the fundamental problem with which the prisoners must deal. For the prisoners, death is punishment (a retribution for sins) but is also invested with the promise of *redemption* (as he tells Ripley, he is “waiting for God to return and raise his servants to redemption,”

which nevertheless amounts, ultimately, to "waiting for death"). And yet the death of a child (Newt, the "she" referred to in Dillon's oration), of the "innocent," interrupts this signification of death, it appears to skip over retribution and straight into redemption. The child's innocence is the exception (to the rule), making the purpose or "cause" of death unclear:

Why? Why the innocent punished? Why the sacrifice? Why the pain?
There aren't any promises. Nothing's certain. Only that some get
called, some get saved. She won't ever know of the hardship and grief
of those of us left behind. We commit these bodies to the void with
a glad heart. For within each seed, there is a promise of a flower, and
within each death, no matter how small, there is always a new life. A
new beginning.

These perplexing contradictions in Dillon's (subjective) attitude toward faith turn on the difference, found in the distinction Saint Paul makes between "works" and "deeds." For Paul, "works" derive their meaning and purpose only with respect to the Law. Their meaning consists wholly in an economy of "exchange," an economy with which we witness Dillon contending, although he is ultimately unable to come to terms with anything *outside* of this economy.

"Innocence" and "guilt" have meaning only with respect to one or the other "side" of the Law, and derive their existence through "works," which for Paul designate a relation of exchange. Moreover, "innocence" and "guilt" are assigned by the State, not God. In the "eyes" of God, at least according to the doctrine of Original Sin, we all are always-already sinners, which amounts to saying, in the end, that we are all the same. This is precisely the jump that the inmates cannot take, stuck as they are in their hyperidentification with the Law. They are stuck in a pseudorelation to the State (that is, the Company) via their idea of God, which arbitrates guilt and innocence according to the Law.

The State doles out punishment and reward on the basis of *actions* (that is, works). It concerns the flesh and not the spirit. No wonder, then, that Fiorina 161 is not merely a prison, but a *work* prison,¹⁸ wherein the prisoners bide their time engaged in repetitive activity that nevertheless keeps them minimally useful, in contrast to the rotting, broken technology around them, and through which they "pay" for their sins with work instead of wages. In this context, we should also pay particular attention to Dillon's suggestion (in the same cafeteria scene), that the inmates "have enough faith here for everybody, even the intolerable." Dillon even compares faith here to money, specifically, the money of the

philanthropist, who shares his abundance with the so-called "less fortunate" (and no doubt "intolerable" insofar as their misfortune haunts the philanthropist, makes him feel guilty for having so much). Along these same lines, Alain Badiou elaborates the consequences of Paul's statement in Romans 4:4 ("To one who works, his wages are not reckoned as grace but as his due"):

[F]or Paul, nothing is due. The salvation of the subject cannot take the form of a reward or wage. The subjectivity of faith is unwaged. . . . It pertains to the granting of a gift, *kharisma*. Every subject is initiated on the basis of a charisma; every subject is charismatic. Since the subjectivating point is the declaration of the event, rather than the work that demands a wage or reward, the declaring subject exists according to the charisma proper to him. . . . The redemptive operation consists in the occurrence of a charisma.¹⁹

I am tempted to say here that, paradoxical as it may seem, the inmates fear Ripley because they aspire to be Ripley. She embodies for them a state, effectively, of innocence, of—and this amounts to the same thing since its meaning derives from the Law—*non-criminality*.²⁰ But this innocence, too, implies for the prisoners that she has not (yet) been a victim, and/or that she does not suffer her own past, since cruelty and violence, in their limited (and, let us say, narcissistic) perspective, can only exist through them, the "miserable sinners in the hands of an angry God."²¹ Ripley represents what they have "lost" or, rather, given away the moment they acquired from the Law the indelible mark of guilt: They have become their crime(s). This coalescence of the inmates' past actions with their identities leaves no room for redemption except by excommunicating oneself from the world and waiting for death to come, stowed away at the "ass end of space" so that they might not experience any temptation to reoffend. Ripley holds up a mirror to their criminality just as the alien holds up a mirror to our humanity, grounded as it is in the human *organism*.

Yet, the film challenges us to think the inmates' unspeakable crimes as not a defective relationship emanating from "inner selves"—that is, a pathological desire emanating from an innately criminal pathology—but to think their crime as having to do with a defective relationship to the State (embodied in, as we have already stated, The Company, Weyland-Yutani, which apparently runs everything). Only by making this leap into the universal can we begin to think the contours of this radical universality of Love (*agape*) "declared" by Saint Paul as the event of Christ's (unconditional) sacrifice and subsequent resurrection.

Such is the predicament the inmates—by the proxy of their charismatic leader, Dillon—find themselves in, and in essence how Law functions vis-à-vis its subjects: The Law grants “freedom” to its subjects in exchange for not traversing certain prescribed limits; the inmates have traversed this limit and so find themselves in a kind of “deathly life,” they continue to “live” only insofar as they are excepted from the (symbolic) community embodied in the State, only insofar as they do not interfere with the affairs of the State. In a subtle, ironic moment near the beginning of the film, when Clemens is leading Ripley to the garbage heap where her escape pod has been discarded, we learn that the inmates consist of a “custodial staff of twenty-five” whose job is merely to “keep the pilot light on.” The facility is a foundry, where the “inmates forge lead sheets for toxic waste containers.” This work effectively describes the very mode of “life” that characterizes the inmates, who might themselves be described as merely “keeping the pilot light on”—participating in the bare minimum necessary for their continued existence, for it would be a sin to commit suicide. Moreover, the facility itself is a kind of “containment unit” for this “bare life,” the prisoners’ *qua* toxic waste. Such are the contours of this “deathly life” of the inmates, whose monotonous activity is directed toward maintaining a homeostatic, desire-less (read: temptation-less) universe that can no longer wreak havoc or harm upon the “innocent.” No wonder, then, they are so agitated by Ripley’s unexpected arrival. The fact that she is female *interrupts* their carefully crafted stasis. In this way, we might alter slightly the suggestion above that the inmates *fear* Ripley. We might instead say that her arrival provokes in them *anxiety*, an anxiety that their activity was directed toward protecting against.

Freedom and Its Discontent

The fundamental problem of the film, then, becomes, *how does one break out of this “closed system,” this “infinite loop,” of Law and transgression, of identity defined and reified by (one’s relationship to) the Law?* Here “Law” should be understood in the widest sense, not only as a set of “external” prescriptions/prohibitions to which one is subject, but of a “chain of events” that has led one to the present moment, according to which one *understands* or through which one *makes sense* of themselves vis-à-vis the radical ambiguity of the present, which, in its radical “openness” disturbs any attempt to maintain a “stable” identity. In fact, we might stress here that it is an essential quality of identity that it must be continually maintained. Ripley’s unexpected arrival disrupts this carefully maintained homeostasis: Ripley, the unexpected visitor, functions as a malignant body

in a hitherto harmonious social organization. She does not, as we have sufficiently emphasized, drop from the "starry heavens," as she does drop from a vast unknown expanse—the same unknown expanse of Space in which the alien lay in waiting—a little sign that these planets that populate the kind of universe as a whole do not exist as isolated and self-contained little islands, in spite of the best efforts of the prisoners to make Fiorina 161 into one, to cut themselves off from everything other than the supplies that are periodically delivered in order to ensure their continued sustenance.

Just as so-called "natural laws" allow us to predict the movement of planets or the behavior of bodies in motion, the Law determines (to some extent) how the prisoners signify their unexpected guest, who provokes in them anxiety on account of the fact that they do not quite know what to do with her, what her presence in their little harmonious, characterized as it is by an *enforced absence* of desire, homosocial sanctum means. It is significant in this context, that Ripley's desire is first symbolized by Morse—and later by Andrews—as having to do with the possibility of breaking the prisoners' "sacred" vow of celibacy. As noted above, Morse highlights, without any provocation, that the prisoners have all "taken a vow of celibacy" that "includes women," as though the mere presence of a woman among the prisoners is in itself an invitation to transgress this vow, as though Ripley's *being* can be reduced to merely *wanting to be fucked*. Such reveals the limit of the prisoners' ability to symbolize the Other, Ripley, and we must not overlook that this limit refers directly to the very transgression that led them to Fiorina 161 in the first place. Interestingly, it is Morse again who, near the end of the film when Ripley and the inmates are gathered to figure out how to kill the alien, gives voice to the anxious question, "*What does this fucking beast want?*" The beast, of course, does not want anything, cannot be appeased by anything, it has no desire. The articulation of this anxious question leads to the final major turning point of the film. Let us first trace the steps that lead to that point.

Anxiety, to refer back our main theme, radically interrupts (the subject's) stasis, the smooth functioning of his or her relation to the world. It announces a presence at the very limit of one's understanding, at the very limit of one's meaningful relationship to the world—meaning, here, being another word for stasis. What happens when we encounter an other? How do we make sense of this other's presence? Saint Paul's injunction to love thy neighbor as thyself is nothing if not a testament to the fact that the other induces in us anxiety.

The subject seeks to alleviate anxiety by inserting the other back into a meaningful relationship with its experience, it seeks to lend to the other a representation, which can only come from the subject's experience, which

is limited by the subject's past, by the extent of the subject's experience. We are incapable of representing anything new, and for that reason the new makes us anxious. Such is the state in which we find the prisoners after Ripley's arrival. Ripley can only be experienced as a potential victim among these "murders and rapists of women"; the only act of hospitality they know is to keep her separate from them, "for [her] own safety." At this meeting point, two worlds collide insofar as the other radically refuses to conform to our representation of reality (whether on account of his or her "passive" ignorance of what this representation is, or his or her "active" refusal of what he or she thinks it is), constituted as it is by our own histories, which play a fundamental role in constructing a meaningful relationship to (so-called "external") reality, the "world" that is "shared" between our neighbor and ourselves. It is, to be sure, a difficult problem to represent, because it is precisely here that we find ourselves at the limit of representation. Hence, the problem of anxiety, a "feeling" that has no object and thus no representative content (and for that reason, the affect for psychoanalysis). The anxious encounter with the neighbor—anxious on account of the fact that we do not know quite what to do with the neighbor, quite what his or her presence means—is given meaning through what we already know. "Redemption" becomes, within this context, "redemption" of our (relationship to our) past, this history that lends consistency and meaning (the two amount to the same) to our lives at the cost of the emergence of a new arrangement, a reconfiguration of this relationship that allows new meaning to emerge.

The first major turning point in the film occurs when Andrews is killed by the alien. As the embodiment of the Law on Fiorina 161, whose responsibility is to maintain a "smoothly running facility," his death necessitates a "reordering" of the community of prisoners. Significant, too, is the fact that with his death there is no longer any dispute about the alien's presence in the facility—previously, the only "witnesses" to the alien's presence did not live to tell about it, with the exception of Golic, who is thought to be insane and thus his words of witness are not given any credence. The "hole" left in the structure of the community after Andrews's death is made evident in the scene immediately following where the prisoners (and Ripley) have regrouped and bombard each other with the hysterical questions, "What do we do now? Who's in charge? Organize, we gotta organize, right?"

At this point, Aaron, who occupies a strangely ambiguous place of Andrews's assistant—ambiguous because he seems to just follow Andrews around, repeating his pronouncements and commands without really doing anything himself—steps up, telling the inmates that he is "next in line" in the chain of command and following this up with some platitudinous

remarks about how Andrews was a "good man." The inmates quickly reject Aaron's attempt to occupy the position of the leader. We get the sense, here, too, that the major problem concerns the question of "what to do." Having now witnessed the presence of the alien stalking the foundry, the former chain of command, whose purpose was to preserve a very specific form of order, no longer serves the same purpose: Is the role of the leader to neutralize the alien threat? How will the former order carry out its purposes now that it is clear that the alien is to blame for disrupting the harmony of the group, a threat that, by its very nature, cannot be reasoned with or appealed to?

Andrews's death necessitates a radically new organization. It is significant in this regard that Ripley does not, strictly speaking, agree to become the new leader of the group, in spite of the community's appeal to her. Moreover, her previous history of killing the alien is of very little use, given the circumstances on Fiorina 161. The technology in the prison complex—technology being one of the key mediators in the previous two films between the humans and the alien—does not work, and the alien itself, Ripley admits, isn't like any she has encountered before. Morse opts to simply take out his frustration on Ripley, suggesting that the inmates "get her head and shove it through the fucking wall" for bringing "the fucker." An intense and prolonged stand-off ensues, following which Ripley implicitly takes command of the group, concocting a plan along with Aaron to trap the alien in a waste-containment area.

The plan fails, which leads ultimately to the second major turning point of the film, where Dillon assumes responsibility for the fate of the group. Significantly, too, Dillon succeeds in bringing about a new meaning, which reconfigures the group's relationship to the alien. Whereas the previous two films derived their central tension from the struggle to survive against the alien, Dillon here turns this around. For him it is a question of honoring those prisoners whom the alien killed: in short, a question of retribution, which requires fully assuming—"willing" even—the circumstances in which they have found themselves and for which there is no escape. (The frequent, if not favorite, escape route for the prisoners up until this moment—particularly Morse—has been blaming one another or Ripley for their fate.)

Dillon presents the community's fate in terms of a choice: Either "you die sitting here on your ass or you die out there. At least we take a shot. We owe it one. . . . Maybe we can get even for the others. Now how do you want it?" This "choice" meets with considerable resistance from the group, particularly Aaron who prefers to wait for the Company to come with "firepower." He does not want to face the possibly of death owing to

the fact that he is not a prisoner and as "a wife" and "a kid." Ripley, in turn, makes it clear that there really is only one option—the choice is, in fact, a "forced choice," because the Company is only interested in the alien for its "bioweapons division." The Company does not value the life that is in danger on Fiorina 161. Here, she gives a brief and impassioned recap of the first two films:

When they first heard about this thing, it was "crew expendable." The next time they sent in marines, they were expendable too. What makes you think they're gonna care about a bunch of lifers who found God at the ass-end of space? You really think they're gonna let you interfere with their plans for this thing? They think we're, we're crud. And they don't give a fuck about one friend of yours that's, that's died. Not one.

The point here is twofold. On the one hand, that the group has no choice but to take control of their own fate: either risk the possibility of death in the confrontation with the alien or be killed by the "rescue team."²² On the other hand, the prison complex is the prisoners' home. Whereas Ripley's struggle in the previous two films was to escape the alien—to survive—and to thus *return home* (this return being the primary motivation for surviving in the first place), the prisoners have no home to return to, they are already there. Additionally, they have nothing else to live for.

Thus, Dillon turns the narrative thrust of the first two films inside out, shifting the emphasis from *protecting life*—which would place them at the mercy, if not the whim of the Company *qua State* and its interests, which are fundamentally at odds with those of the prison community—to *accepting death*:

We're all going to die. The only question is how you check out. Do you want it on your feet or on your fucking knees begging? I ain't much for begging. Nobody ever gave me nothing. So I say fuck that thing! Let's fight it!

Here, too, we return to Badiou's reading of Saint Paul's notion of *kharisma*. It is precisely at this moment where Dillon's symbolic pronouncement of his faith is transformed, or, rather, brought forth into the world as action. One might say that it is precisely in this moment that the prisoners become—via Dillon—"true believers." The alien is inscribed into their universe of meaning as that through which they will find redemption, rather than an obstacle to redemption. In this third and final meeting of the inmates, in which Dillon is finally instated as their spiritual and worldly leader (recall

that, in the second meeting, where Ripley implicitly takes command of the group, the inmates first turn to Dillon, who claims he is "not the officer type" and just "take[s] care of [his] own"), word and flesh, thinking and doing, converge in this (free) act of assuming responsibility for one's death—a responsibility that has been, at least according to the letter of Dillon's faith, the goal from the start, yet he continued, along with the rest of the group who are far less certain in their faith, to cling to life, which required a minimal attachment to the order (and sustenance) provided via Andrews and the Company's occasional shipments of supplies.²³

Here we arrive at the final turning point, wherein Love begins to emerge, and which leads to the successful extermination of the alien, insofar as the register is shifted from trying to escape death—a desire that comes with its own pathological (self-interested) baggage—to honoring those who have died. Here, too, the inmates and Ripley find common ground: Both have had their lives overturned by the alien's presence, both have lost friends, and neither can hope for any reconciliation by appealing to the Company, which views them as an expendable excess, a means to (furthering) its own ends. In exchange—and here we emphasize the pact that allows for the Law's smooth functioning—the Company offers a kind of ersatz "life" (that is, a life which is not granted as a gift, but as one side of a bargain), whether it is that the prisoners are allowed to remain on Fiorina 161 to keep the facility running, or, a much more salient example, the deal that Bishop tries to strike with Ripley at the end of the film, when the rescue team arrives, offering to remove the alien from her: "Come with me. You still can have a life: children, and most important you'll know its dead. Let me help you." Here, it is as if James Cameron himself is speaking through Bishop. Ripley's decisive refusal and subsequent fall into molten lead restores or, rather, gives rise to possibility. This is precisely the dimension that the two previous films miss by putting the emphasis on *escape*, even if Cameron's sequel culminates in a final battle between Ripley (with the aid of gigantic, prosthetic body in the form of a mechanical "power-loader") and the alien queen, this nevertheless functions as a (successful) attempt to remove an immediate external threat to survival in order to restore the status quo.

What if the key difference between these respective endings—let us even say the key feature of *agapē* introduced in *Alien³*—consists in the fact that Ripley is no longer fighting *against* a powerful, external enemy, but that when she takes the leap into the molten lead with the alien she does it out of *love* for the Company? When Ripley rejects Bishop's "offer" (of a family, children, etc.) with a decisive "No!" and backs away from him, he resorts to what we should read as an impotent gesture of begging: "Ripley!

Think of all we can learn from it! You must let me have it! It's a magnificent specimen!" The point here is not only that "now the truth comes out," now we see that Bishop meant to deceive Ripley; rather, Bishop, the direct representative of the Company, shows that he—and by extension the Company—is lacking, that the Law is not an omnipotent entity in full control of itself and the humans under its protection but is rather guided by a pathological and excessive need for knowledge and control, as though it is itself necessarily accountable to a cruel and superegoic "master," which it can neither control or understand, like Saint Paul who tells us in the Epistle to the Romans that, on account of our carnal nature, we are sold under sin. As subject, "I allow not [that which I do]: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I" (Romans 7:15). It is precisely here that we finally get out of the deadlock of the Law: By destroying herself and the alien, Ripley actively assumes the lack in the Other, the anxious void that motivates the Company's obsessive desire for knowledge and power.

In contrast, the final battle between the alien queen and Ripley in *Aliens* should be understood as an attempt—consistent throughout Cameron's sequel—to *preserve the fantasy*: Ripley may very well be willing to die in her efforts to kill the alien, but as the well-known one-liner from the film goes—"Get away from her, you bitch!"—her efforts are directed toward preserving the fantasy of Newt's innocence. The unfortunate Newt becomes an object of exchange between the alien ("bad mother") and Ripley (the "good mother"). They fight one another to the death over the precious resource of Newt's recognition, which amounts to one of two things: for Ripley, the narcissistic identification of herself as mother, which in Cameron's limited universe seems to be the thing for which one lives; for the alien queen, Newt is a "host," a necessary means for the continued propagation of the species. Yet both cases wholly partake in the dimension of "oblatory love," whereby it is Newt that becomes the sacrifice on either the ideological altar of familial fantasy or the biological altar of the preservation of a species. This fantasy dimension remains safely at a distance, unconscious and (for that very reason) unabated; the guarantor of the consistency and meaning of Ripley's efforts.

By committing her own body, and, through this act, that of the alien offspring, "to the void" in the final moments of *Alien*³, Ripley reinstates the radical openness of freedom's possibility. As Dillon tells us again and again throughout the film, "nothing is certain," to be sure, but that is precisely the point. If the absolute limit of meaning in the *Alien* universe is constituted by the family unit—as suggested not only by Cameron's sequel, but also by Bishop's "offering" to Ripley in exchange for the alien—it is precisely Ripley's refusal to allow the promise of family to be used as a bargaining

chip that reinstates the possibility of meaning. As Ripley remarks to the inquest committee investigating the destruction of the ship in *Alien*, "if one of those things gets down here, that will be all," the possibility of the alien's presence on earth extinguishes all meaningful human activity. It is worthwhile to note, too, apropos of this salient emphasis on "family" in the films (starting, at least explicitly in *Aliens*, but still evident to some extent, too, in Ripley's relationship to her cat, Jones, in *Alien*) suggests that it is precisely the kind of meaningful human relationships that "family" supposedly represents that separates human beings from the purely biological striving toward the reproduction of the species that is the *sine qua non* of the alien's activity. The "family" represents an immaterial supplement to the biological imperative of reproduction. But again, the point here is not that the familial relationship offers any guarantee, but that it is nevertheless the very locus of this immaterial dimension that makes us more than the sum of our biological parts.

The alien thus represents the absolute limit of meaning, the "pure," meaningless organic substance that we have in common with all organisms in spite of the fact that it tends to remain, for the most part, out of sight and out of mind. No wonder, then, that Fincher repeatedly makes use of diagnostic images akin to an X-ray or an ultrasound. These technological advances allow us to peer inside the human organism, to, as it were, bring this fleshly substance to the surface, but it nevertheless remains radically incommensurate to the "spiritual" dimension, by which we designate this (self-)conscious dimension, through which we relate to ourselves and others constitutive of the experience of "mind," and by which we constitute a *meaningful* relationship to ourselves and the world outside of us. Our interest, then, in the Christian dimension introduced into the narrative of the *Alien* films in Fincher's contribution to the series, consists in how it engages with Christianity not in its capacity as an institution and practice, but in how it informs and symbolizes this (dis)relation between flesh and spirit.

In a comment on a passage in one of G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown mysteries, *The Oracle of the Dog*, Žižek notes the way in which Christianity "made Chesterton prefer prosaic explanations to all-too-fast resorts to supernatural magic—and to engage in writing detective fiction."²⁴ The passage that catches Žižek's interest in this story concerns the Incarnation wherein Father Brown argues that the "first effect of not believing in God [is] that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are. Anything that anybody talks about, and says there's a good deal in it, extends itself indefinitely like a vista in a nightmare . . . and all because you are frightened of four words: He was made Man."²⁵ This fascinating reversal and defense of materiality under the auspices of a belief in God prompts

Žižek to take a further step, which, although "no doubt not intended by Chesterton" is "nonetheless closer to a weird truth:"

[W]hen people imagine all kinds of deeper meanings because they are "frightened of four words: He was made Man," what really frightens them is that they will lose the transcendent God guaranteeing the meaning of the universe, God as the hidden Master pulling the strings—instead of this, we get a God who abandons this transcendent position and throws himself into his own creation, fully engaging himself in it up to dying, so that we, humans, are left with no higher Power watching over us, just with the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the fate of divine creation, and thus of God himself.²⁶

This "weird truth" leads us to the very problem delineated and explored over the course of (at least) the first three *Alien* films (which we have limited ourselves to, although I do not think that the line of thought I have laid out in these pages is wholly incompatible with the fourth film, *Alien Resurrection*). Fincher explores Christianity as a religion that is radically implicated in the world, or, rather, in worldly matters. By this I mean, in the first place, that the flesh constitutes as important a reference point as the spirit. We see this most evidently, of course, in the figure of Christ, and in the peculiar paradox that Christ represents apropos of the Incarnation, to which Chesterton (and Žižek) draw our attention: "He was made Man." It is precisely this intersection of flesh and spirit that Fincher inserts Christianity into the film. It allows him bring forward the unquestioned primacy of the flesh in the first two films, in which survival and heroics are somehow valued and achieved for their own sake without reference to that which gives them meaning.

If *Alien*³, moreover, concerns itself with the "worldliness" of Christianity, we see it too in how the prisoners (and Ripley among them) take charge of their own fate *through* their faith. Although throughout the film Dillon stresses that there are no guarantees ("nothing is certain"), his insistence does not translate into a nihilistic withdrawal from reality but is rather a cause for engagement with the very conditions (however contingent the circumstances that lead to one's being thrown into them) in which one finds oneself. That "nothing is certain" is as much a reason for hope as it is for resignation. As a kind of universal principle, it applies as much to the Company—the nefarious but ultimately impotent Master—as it does to Ripley and the prisoners. The Company derives its power from the population under it (which includes the prisoners), who lend their consent to it through a kind of passionate attachment to the fantasies it offers in exchange for its continued and unabated existence. So it is, then, that Morse—whose

name derives from that seemingly ancient (at least in technological terms) revolution in long-distance communication, but which also emphasizes the "coded" nature of communication—is the sole survivor and witness to the events on Fiorina 161. Perhaps it is here that we can locate how Fincher imagines the "worldly" spirit that lives on after death (which is not, to be sure, far from the Holy Spirit), in the word, which, long after the flesh, traverses space and time and confronts us with its enigmatic message.

Notes

1. Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 16.
2. Ibid., 20.
3. Ibid., 84.
4. Ibid.
5. Dan Jolin, "Alien³: The Lost Tale of the Wooden Planet," accessed April 15, 2012, *Empire*, <http://www.empireonline.com/features/alien-3-tale-of-the-wooden-planet/default.asp>.
6. James Swallow, *Dark Eye: The Films of David Fincher* (Surrey, UK: Reynolds and Hearn, 2003), 59.
7. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 94.
8. Compared to the first two *Alien* films, scholarship on *Alien³* is grossly under-represented. Of those articles that do deal with *Alien³*, hardly any actually address the religious content of the film, a notable exception being Kathleen Murphy, "The Last Temptation of Sigourney Weaver," *Film Content* 28, no. 4 (July 1992):17–20.
9. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (New York: Verso, 2000), 45.
10. Ted Billy, "'This Whole Place Is a Basement': The Gnostic/Existentialist Vision of *Alien³*," *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 16 (1995): 229–35.
11. Ibid., 231.
12. Slavoj Žižek, "Dialectical Clarity Versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox," in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 264–65.
13. It is important to note here that the cosmos—i.e., the "background" of the vast darkness of space upon which the action of the film is inscribed, much like words on a (previously) blank page—play a role in the *Alien* series unlike films such as *Star Wars* (1977) or *Star Trek* (1979), represented in the striking contrast between the films' respective scores. *Alien* (composed by Jerry Goldsmith, who, interestingly, also composed the *Star Trek* theme) opts for a sparse, almost atonal score, whereas the scores of *Star Wars* (composed by John Williams) and *Star Trek* evoke a Romantic tradition comparable to Beethoven or Mozart and better suited to evoke a sense of "eternal" or "transcendental" plentitude behind an otherwise anxiety-inducing infinite "void" of Space.

14. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 87.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 88.

17. Here, again, we should not lose sight of the fact that *Alien³* follows from James Cameron's fervent denial of Ripley's history, the mechanism that allows for its (comparatively) "happy" ending, as we have noted above. So that its fundamental dilemma of *Alien³* is, essentially, *what to do with the problem of Ripley's (traumatic) past*.

18. Clemens notes this to Ripley near the beginning of the film, when she wakes up and asks where she is: "Fury 161. It's one of Weyland-Yutani's [the name of the Company] backwater work prisons."

19. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, 77.

20. There is here, too, an important relationship at play between the fantasies that we as viewers of the film, and as fans of the series, project onto Ripley as the strong-willed hero (nowhere is this more evident than in Cameron's contribution to the series, which is the *culmination* of this fantasy), whom we identify with in some capacity: She is able to overcome all odds, she does not let the burden of her past weigh her down, etc. It is as if Fincher here, too, is suggesting that we are the prisoners (of our own histories, our own preconceptions about Ripley from the past films, etc.) in this story, and our admiration of Ripley is as much a construction of fantasy as the fantasmatic image of Ripley that guides the prisoners' incomprehensible destructive and xenophobic aggression. Both bear on a relationship to our pasts: As fans we might be more apt to take pleasure in Ripley overcoming unspeakable adversity (where we cannot), whereas hardened criminals, guilty of crimes against women and who are thus seeking redemption through removing themselves from the temptation of reoffending, "see" Ripley as an opportunity to reoffend, rather than to overcome the history that has hitherto defined them by, say, a selfless act of hospitality, a decisive break from the(ir) past.

21. Dillon says this in his opening prayer before the first of Andrews's "rumor control" meetings in yet another tragically deleted scene.

22. In yet another unfortunately deleted scene this problem is made more explicit when Ripley responds to Aaron's appeal to "wait for a rescue" by asking, "A rescue for whom?"

23. Andrews remarks to Ripley during a scene about midway through the film in which she asks whether or not there are weapons in the facility that could be used against the alien that if the inmates were to kill Andrews, "there is no way to escape. With the arrival of the next supply ship, the Company would eliminate them."

24. Slavoj Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity," in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 25.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.