A Cinema of Aliens, Cyborgs, and Mutants: 
Visual Articulations of the Alien Other in the History of Mainstream 
Science Fiction Film 

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1. Preliminaries

The approach I take in this paper deals with the “other” not as such, but with its construction or, to use Lawrence Grossberg’s term of choice, its “articulation” in popular culture. More specifically, I map its articulations in and across the texts and practices of mainstream science fiction film, focusing primarily on three groups of texts (films and, in one case, associated television series) – the *Star Trek* franchise, the *Alien* saga, and the two cinematic versions of *The Thing* – but occasionally drawing also on further examples to relate these specific instances to the genre at large. The time-span covered in the process varies with each of these groups, ranging from 25 years in the case of the *Alien* saga to more than 35 years for the *Star Trek* franchise. In the course of those years, the socio-cultural context in which these fictions have to be located and understood has, to put it mildly, undergone considerable changes. Only by adopting a contextualist perspective such as that of cultural studies does it become possible to trace the relationships, the lines of effectivity between these historical contexts as conditions of possibility and the discursive realizations or articulations of the other in science fiction.

My enquiries into cinematic articulations of the other are furthermore informed by the notion (put forward, among others, by Edward Said and Michel de Certeau) that the other can only be understood – and, indeed, can only exist – in relation to the self and vice versa. According to Said (1978), the other is thus the precondition of the self as much as the self is the precondition of the other. In science fiction in general, this relation between self and other is characteristically portrayed as one of conflict or struggle. Equally characteristically, in what David Bordwell has called on “excessively obvious cinema”, this struggle is articulated not as figurative but actual, physical conflict over life and death. Another important feature of the articulation of this conflict in mainstream science fiction cinema is that it is not simply a physical, but a bodily struggle, a conflict not only with and by bodies, but over and within bodies. Thus, the present study’s account of the body in science fiction film can also be seen as a contribution to the growing interest of the humanities in the human body as a “battlefield” for cultural forces, a “site” where meaning can be negotiated and em-bodied.

In writing this account of bodily articulations of the other in science fiction, I draw mainly on two theoretical trajectories which, at first glance, might appear to be fundamentally at odds with each other. The first of these trajectories, the “theory of articulation” formulated in Grossberg (1997), has been given shape by and within the field of cultural studies and is therefore both contextualist and anti-essentialist. It requires viewing a given phenomenon’s socio-cultural context as its “conditions of possibility” and thus elliptically approaches the
radically relativist position of postmodern theory. This theoretical position is combined here with a second trajectory, Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytical “theory of abjection”. It requires viewing cultural phenomena associated with the grotesque and horror as the result of more or less universal processes of human socialization, thus elliptically approaching an essentialist position. While these two trajectories would seem to be mutually exclusive, I want to argue that the tensions created by articulating them together are in fact productive. While the former can account for the variation of socio-cultural conditions and relate these changes to the structure and form of situated texts such as mainstream science fiction films, the latter offers a way of accounting for the remarkable continuity of the textual means by which fear and horror are evoked in such films.

These specific means, it would appear, have remained much the same over the course of the last 40 years, serving a remarkable variety of narrative and ideological ends in an equally remarkable variety of historical junctures in U.S. society: from the days of McCarthyism to the present day of information, cybernetics, and virtuality. Along the way, one encounters cinematic articulations of nearly every social fear or trauma experienced by U.S. society in those years, be they predominantly biological, economic, cultural, political, or ethnic in outlook. The fight against an alien other in science fiction has thus “stood in”, as it were, for racism in its various shapes and (dis)guises, the Cold War, the resistance to the devaluation of manual labor and the influx of foreign manual laborers, the threat posed to the patriarchal order by the Women’s Liberation movement, the surge of homophobia related to the spread of AIDS, and the increasing blurring of technological and biological boundaries. In all these instances, the seemingly innocent fictions of fantastical worlds in which human and alien civilizations inevitably clash need to be seen as articulations of their respective conditions of possibility, i.e. their socio-cultural context and contingent contradictions.

2. Cultural Studies, Theory, and Popular Culture

The transdisciplinary project of cultural studies has a peculiar relationship to “other” theories, as it were, treating them as hypotheses and resources, to be fitted to, and articulated with, its particular project. Theory, in other words, is contingent. Or else, as Lawrence Grossberg puts it: in doing cultural studies, “[y]ou go where you need to” (Grossberg, 1997: 293). Theoretical bricolage is thus a productive and necessary part of the practice of cultural studies, and the following pages enact their own “detour through theory” in order to arrive at a better understanding of the body as a site of negotiating otherness in science fiction film.
In studying the contextual meaning and specificity of cultural articulations of the other, or indeed of any articulation, the task is less that of interpreting texts and audiences than of “describing vectors, distances and densities, intersections and interruptions, and the nomadic wandering […] through this unequally and unstably organized field of tendential forces and struggles” (Grossberg 1997: 312). The spatial vocabulary of vectors and lines associated with Grossberg’s notion of articulation derives indirectly from cultural studies’ commitment to conjuncturalism. This position holds that, while there are no necessary correspondences or relations (between causes and effects, between signs and meanings), there are nevertheless always real, effective correspondences.

Since the notion of “articulation” is an integral part of Grossberg’s theory of agency, it may be helpful to turn to its origin in Marx’s statement that “people make history but in conditions not of their own making”. Rereading Marx, Grossberg (1997) argues that the links that seem to give a particular text or set of texts a particular effective meaning, that connect it with a particular social group and political position, are forged by people operating within the limits of their real conditions and the historically articulated “tendential lines of force”. The articulation of any meaning is thus seen as the ongoing construction of unstable (to varying degrees) relations between practices and structures, texts and contexts. This position effectively fractures the transcendental claim of the sign’s function (i.e., the stability of a preconstituted meaning) and posits a notion of the sign as effective precisely insofar as it contextually produces meaning.

Given that the relation between a text and its context is one of articulation, it follows that “[t]he difference between a text and its context, or a practice and a structure, is only a product of the level of abstraction at which one is operating” (Grossberg 1997: 221). At a different level, the relation between text and practice also parallels that between any effect and its conditions of possibilities, because “cultural practices [are] places where multiple trajectories of effects and investment are articulated, as the point of intersection and negotiation of radically different kinds of vectors of determination – including material, affective, libidinal, semiotic, semantic, and so on” (Grossberg 1997: 22). Regarding the levels of analysis involved in the present project, the individual films considered here are located on the textual level, while the production processes, technical and narrative conventions, and related social phenomena that go to make up what is commonly called “Hollywood” are located at the level of social practices. The stratum of social practices thus mediates, as it were, between textual products and socio-cultural contexts, which it is both a part of and non-identical with.
As regards cultural studies’ commitment to contextual analysis, its self-appointed “contextualist task” is “not merely to try to identify the objective context into which a particular text is inserted, but to (re)construct the context – which can never be centred around any single text or practice – of a particular (e.g., ideological) field, in terms of how it is articulated, both internally and externally into specific relations” (Grossberg 1997: 224). In other words, cultural studies has to move from a description of the social context as a structure of social relationships and experiences to another description of the context as a field of forces, a matrix of conditions or configurations of possibility. Rearticulated from this perspective, the meaning of any textual practice, a “productivity” like that of the subject, becomes “a determined and determining effect of a material context”. And while the apparent presence of meaning is not an illusion since meaning is itself effective within the context, it can never be finished or final, because “it is the product of practices that arrest the potentially unending movement of signifiers” (Grossberg 1997: 65). Cultural studies’ materialism thus replaces the notion of stable signifiers with that of signifying or discursive practices: these are seen as producing signifiers in apparently stable relationships to one another and in a particular position vis-à-vis the others.

One of the local effects that these theoretical assumptions have on and in the practice of cultural studies is a methodological commitment to specificity. It dictates that one can only deal with, and from within, specific contexts, “for it is only there that identities and relations exist effectively” (Grossberg 1997: 242). The only way to arrive at meaning as the actual “local” effectivity of “the concrete” is to recognize (a) how it is articulated by other relations and (b) its specific ability to produce effects – its reach or penetration into the social formation – across time and space. Thus, as Grossberg puts it, the practice of cultural studies involves “the attempt to construct the specificity of a conjuncture, the appropriateness of which is only given by the intellectual and political project at hand” (Grossberg 1997: 242). The significance of this assertion is that any context discussed in studies of this kind has to be treated as a product of the analysts, who “(re)construct, through their own intellectual labour, the context they are studying and how they are located in it” (Grossberg 1997: 322). As a consequence, the “local,” like the “concrete” in Marx, is neither a given, nor the beginning of research, but its end. In fact, it is, as Grossberg puts it, “the most difficult ‘thing’ to get hold of” (Grossberg 1997: 322).

Bearing all this in mind, the approach taken here begins with the recognition that Hollywood cinema as a social practice has to a significant degree assumed the role and function of the telling of myths in contemporary U.S. society. It consequently seems possible
to apply Lévi-Strauss’ assumptions regarding the social function of myth to the textual products of mainstream science fiction as a genre. If, as Lévi-Strauss argued, a society starts telling itself myths when, as a culture, it is faced with contradictory experience which it cannot make conscious to itself, then it should be possible to find “effects” or “residues” of these contradictions on a textual level. Since myth, as part of its social function and ideological work, effectively preserves the contradiction at the same time as it “resolves” it in another medium and through another modality, Lévi-Strauss also spoke of myths as the imaginary resolution to real contradictions.

Working more or less within this framework of cultural analysis, film studies have frequently transformed Lévi-Straussian analyses of myths into a diagrammatic representation known A. J. Greimas’ “semiotic square” (cf. Greimas 1983). This square is built on the notion of minimal semantic units or “semes”, which can be arranged in a four-term homology to represent – however rudimentarily – the basic relations of a text.

According to Greimas (1983), these four semes establish logical relations to one another. Seme S1 is the positive term; S2 establishes a relation of opposition to S1; -S1 is the contrary of S1; and –S2 is implied by S1. By means these logical relations, the semiotic square offers a way of modeling the way a narrative generates a sense of coherence and closure in terms of a structure containing negation, equivalence, opposition, and contradiction. It furthermore has the advantage of articulating any apparently static free-standing concept or term into a larger whole, even if it does not allow for any kind of relationship other than that of the binary opposition. In fact, it is precisely these oppositions that generate most of mainstream cinema’s action and plot, while any term that refuses to belong to either term in a semiotic square can still be meaningfully analyzed as a site of contested meaning.

At the surface structure of the text, an “other” is thus positioned in opposition to the self, which is made to stand in for one or more specific socio-cultural “others” which, at a specific point in history, are experienced as a threat by the culture giving rise to the text. As a consequence, the characters and elements of any fictional world – whatever their logical
motivations in the diegesis of the narrative – are always also engaged at the symbolic or cultural level, simply because they are articulations of contextual conditions of possibility.

3. Discourses about the Other

As Michel de Certeau (1986) has argued, an account of the other in Western thought needs to begin by recognizing that it has always been thematized as a threat, as a “potential same-to-be, a yet-not-same”. This always already implicit need of assimilating the other follows from the fact that any autonomous order is, in fact, founded upon what it eliminates. In this process of elimination, however, any order also produces a “residue” condemned to be forgotten or repressed. But what was excluded “re-infiltrates the place of its origin […] it resurfaces, it troubles […] it lurks – this ‘wild,’ this ‘ob-scene,’ this ‘filth’” (de Certeau 1986: 4). The relationship between self and other and is thus one of repression and subsequent infiltration on the one hand, and of a necessarily unfulfilled longing to (re-)assimilate the repressed on the other hand.

In the history of Western culture, the genre traditionally associated with the encounter between self and other is “that of the quest romance of chivalry in which the adventurous knight leaves Arthur’s court – the realm of the known – to encounter some form of otherness, a domain in which the courtly values of the Arthurian world do not prevail” (de Certeau 1986: xiii). The quest is fulfilled and the narrative brought to an end only when this alien domain is brought within the hegemonic sway of the known, Arthurian world, with the result that “the other has been reduced to (more of) the same” (de Certeau 1986: xiii). The quest in each instance has to prove that the other is amenable to being reduced to the status of the same, for, de Certeau argues, “it is ideologically inconceivable that there should exist an otherness of the same ontological status as the same, without there being immediately mounted an effort at its appropriation” (de Certeau, 1986: xiii).

By way of elaborating de Certeau’s highly condensed synopsis of the struggle between self and other, it could be added that the “realm of the known” seems to coincide, in Kristeva's post-Lacanian terms, with the realm of the father, the law, and the symbolic. From this perspective, the “alien domain” referred to by de Certeau, his “realm of otherness”, would then coincide with the realm of the mother and the semiotic, which, in its repressed state, poses a threat to the integrity and stability of the self. Juxtaposing the two theoretical positions in this manner accounts for the fact that articulations of the “alien other” in science fiction film are characteristically articulated together with the abject, creating an uneasy but nevertheless highly conventional equation between the two notions.
A further passage in de Certeau (1986) emphasizes – well beyond the connection between the other and the abject already established – the role of the body for discourses about the other in Western culture. When describing the difficulties of providing textual proof of the other, de Certeau posits that “the probability of an eyewitness is not enough. It is necessary for the body to be written by the other, engraved, pierced” (de Certeau 1986: 162). The text, in other words, can only be the body of the self, wounded and traumatized by its encounter with the other, since “[i]t is necessary for the outline of the unreadable signifier [the other] to be traced in it” (de Certeau 1986: 162). Beginning with the Franciscan stigmata, de Certeau traces the Western tradition of inscription on the body as tattooing and torture, which, at all times, fulfilled the function of proof more than it made sense: “The inscription remains an unknown graph (though it is known by its unknown author)” (de Certeau 1986: 162). There seems to be a striking affinity between de Certeau’s account of the writing of the other and Kristeva’s theory of abjection (discussed in detail below), as both emphasize the significance of the body as text. But following de Certeau’s argument concerning the equation between the body of the self and the text that is written of the other is only the first step in accounting for the significance of the body in science fiction. The logical conclusion of this replacement of pen and page with the sword and the body, as de Certeau argues, is that the text becomes “a writing of loss progressing toward the point where death becomes a ‘fortunate shipwreck’” (de Certeau 1986: 162). Thus, death is articulated as merciful insofar as it saves the body from being written by the other, a frequent theme in science fiction films such as *Aliens* or *Star Trek: First Contact*. Significantly, de Certeau also makes clear that the proof provided by the inscription of the other is proportional to the wound it leaves. This important qualification to the more general assumptions discussed above partly explains the ever more outrageous and ever more horrifying forms of the abject in contemporary science fiction film.

For all its glamour and success, Hollywood film and its associated discourses are not the whole story of the other in Western thought. There are other discourses about the other, counter-hegemonic articulations that can be found not only in philosophy, but on the margins of science fiction (in both films and novels). In a similar vein, and against the prevalent view of the other, de Certeau pits the conviction, voiced by Clifford Geertz, that we need to see “ourselves amongst others, as a local example […] a case among cases, a world among worlds” (Geertz, as quoted in de Certeau 1986: 4). As de Certeau points out, a similar awareness of an “other” way, as it were, of relating to the other, has been around for some time, but has never gained much ground in Western thought. For an alternate model of truth
(about the self and the other), and against a notion of truth as the instrument of a mastery being exercised by the knower over areas of the unknown as they are brought within the fold of the same, de Certeau turns to Emmanuel Lévinas. This French philosopher advocates a form of truth that is totally alien to the self, one it does not discover within itself, but that calls on it from beyond. It ultimately requires the self to leave the realms of the known and of the same in order to settle in a land that us under the rule of the other. Here the self sets out on an adventure of uncertain outcome, but it does not encounter the other as a threat to be reduced or assimilated, but that which constitutes the self as an ethical being. In this originary encounter with the other, it would be possible for the self to discover its responsibility for the existence of this other, a responsibility that lies at the root of all its subsequent ethical decisions (cf. de Certeau 1986: xvi). Science fiction novels such as Larry Niven’s *Footfall* are undeniable instances of an other science fiction, one that sees the self as a local example among others rather than as the necessary enemy and potential master over the alien other. Unfortunately, this alternative in science fiction has not had much impact on the mainstream of science fiction film, remaining confined to the margins of mostly literary narratives.

4. The Kristevan Abject

As has already been indicated, it is possible to exploit a certain affinity between de Certeau’s account of the other and Kristeva’s theory of abjection in mapping bodily articulations of the other. While the former describes the place and significance of the other in discourse, and while both assign special significance to the body, the latter focuses on the powers of horror in discourses about the body. As such, Kristeva’s theory is well suited to explaining science fiction’s continuing obsession with bodily forms of horror. It is mainly in her 1982 essay on the powers of horror that Kristeva offers her re-reading of Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque grotesque, arguing that, in both *Rabelais and His World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin uses a relatively conventional literary critical approach to introduce his notion of carnival. He appropriates, as it were, Rabelais’ work in order to evoke the forgotten tradition of “popular humour”, which, he claims, allows one to make sense of the more grotesque aspects of Rabelais’ work. In a similar vein, though from a different perspective, Bakhtin traces the roots of the polyphony of Dostoevsky’s work to the same carnival past.

From the very beginning of her argument, Kristeva emphasizes that carnival is “a signifier, but also a signified”, since it can be the subject or the means of representation in a text, or both. As a consequence, the carnivalesque can work its effects in textual images, plot,
or language itself, and is therefore not confined to the specific medium in which both Bakhtin and Kristeva investigate it. In Bakhtin’s work, however, carnival is discussed mainly in relation to the literary genre of “grotesque realism”, which, in turn, centers on the image of the grotesque body. This focus of Bakhtin’s theory has attracted a great deal of criticism, mainly because it raises problematic questions of gender, ethnicity, class, as well as otherness in general. Kristeva has done much to resolve the problematic relations of Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body to psychoanalysis, and her theory of abjection is the culmination of her re-articulation of Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque and grotesque body.

4.1. The Carnivalesque

In order to establish his notion of carnival, Bakhtin has to mythicize a part of (literary) history, claiming that the historical carnivals which characterized the Middle Ages, up to the time of Rabelais in the sixteenth century, live on in “transposed” form in literary texts (cf. Bakhtin 1984b: 124). He furthermore suggests that the carnivals of the Middle Ages had a much more prominent role in the life of the ordinary people than their successors do today. And while carnival has also been read as a stabilizing force in the hegemonic struggle of the ruling classes, Bakhtin sees in the carnivalesque and grotesque a positive force of resistance, an expression of the “explosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious and semiotic” (Bakhtin 1981: 44).

As he makes his case for reading carnival as a positive phenomenon, Bakhtin discusses several phenomena that would be considered negative under normal circumstances, but are “reconfigured” as positive through the license of carnival. Thus, Bakhtin argues, the death of the individual is reconfigured as only a moment in the life of the larger group, of a “body of the people” that never hurts or dies. This is possible only because carnivalesque death and dismemberment are not primarily realistic, but linguistic and always contain an element of rebirth and renewal. Finally, carnivalesque death is positive in so far as it brings “down to earth” anything ineffable or authoritarian, “returning” the spectator or reader to the bodily grotesque through mockery and other strategies of debasement (cf. Bakhtin 1984b: 195).

One contemporary strand of critique of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque is particularly pertinent to the grotesque in science fiction as it focuses on the apparent association of the grotesque with the feminine. It thus opens up Bakhtin’s theory to issues of gender and sexuality, both of which are highly contested fields not only in contemporary theory but in science fiction as well. If grotesque images are indeed, as Bakhtin claims, associated
predominantly with “copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment” (Bakhtin 1984b: 25), then they seem to be closer to the feminine than to the masculine. And while Bakhtin himself would still claim that the carnivalesque and grotesque are gender free rather than gendered, Kristeva’s post-Lacanian notion of the abject is based obviously upon the gendered distinction between the maternal (semiotic) and the paternal (symbolic). In his own terms, Bakhtin originally conceived of the carnivalesque as in opposition to what he terms “the classical” rather than “the masculine”. Carnival is thus distinguished from “classical” aesthetics which are associated with “the ready-made […] the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development” (Bakhtin 1984b: 25). In terms of this binary opposition, the classical body is “isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies” (Bakhtin 1984b: 28), while the carnivalesque body is continuously transgressed, crossed, and merged.

Regarding textual phenomena, it is easy to see how Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body might be applied to contemporary film. As argued in greater detail below, science fiction films employ multiple strategies of visual dismemberment, by either literally dismembering or visually “listing” body parts. This technique can be seen as analogous to the novelistic device of carnivalesque “sacrificial” dismemberment, identified by Bakhtin as an irreverent listing of parts of the body (cf. Vice 1997: 159). While the negative, horrifying qualities of the grotesque under normal circumstances cannot be accounted for in Bakhtin’s terms, they form the focus of Kristeva’s reading, as outlined below.

4.2. The Grotesque as the Horrifying Other

Significantly, Kristeva’s theory of the abject adopts much of Bakhtin’s language and categories, while also giving them a different, psychoanalytical inflection. The actual point of departure for Kristeva is Bakhtin’s recognition that most contemporary versions of the grotesque will feature only its downward aspect, but not its regenerative, life-giving moment (cf. Vice 1997: 162). The reason given by Bakhtin for this conspicuous absence of the positive grotesque in recent history is the onset of capitalism and privatized, individual life. In fact, Kristeva begins to theorize the grotesque by giving a different account of its negative reading (cf. Kristeva 1982: 138, 205). Unlike the Bakhtinian grotesque, which is a mode of performance or writing, a primarily textual phenomenon with links into an unproblematic and idealized past, the Kristevan abject is, in effect, part of her theory of the human subject, which at once distinguishes her approach from Bakhtin’s humanist view.
In general terms, Kristeva’s account of the subject can be regarded as a combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis with the Bakhtinian grotesque, as it incorporates elements from both approaches (cf. Vice 1997: 163). According to Kristeva, the child exists at first in the maternal semiotic realm, characterized by the bodily rhythms and pulsions which will later form the basis of language and grammar. The child then enters the symbolic realm, as it becomes socialized and learns to speak; this is the paternal arena of language, law, and gender difference, in which the stable subject exists most of the time after completing this transition. The semiotic, however, is not entirely lost even at this stage, but continues to exert pressure on the symbolic from within, in the form of linguistic and bodily lapses. It is the mother who educates the child in the ways of the symbolic – through social codes of cleanliness, bodily boundaries, how and what to eat, and so on – and this educative role implies that the maternal must be rejected along with the unacceptable practices the mother has taught the child to reject.

Any lapse from the symbolic domain, consequently poses the threat of casting the human subject back into the unmeaning of the semiotic, causing anxiety, neurosis or even psychosis in that subject. What is more, Kristeva suggests that the subject’s position in the symbolic realm is only precariously maintained at any time, and thus anything that threatens to send the subject back into semiotic is accompanied by sensations of dread and, even more prominently, disgust and revulsion. Sensations of nausea experienced when confronted with certain kinds of bodily fluid, for instance, represent the subject’s urge to keep the pollutant out of its way. In the domain of the symbolic, bodily fluids, such as blood, mucus, or urine, are signs of health when they are within the body, but signs of a dangerous transgression of boundaries when they are outside. This sense of pollution does not necessarily have anything to do with the danger of being literally poisoned or physically harmed; in most cases, the threat to the subject from an unacceptable substance is metaphorical, taking place on the level of both signifier and signified. In Kristeva’s terms, “abjection” denotes precisely that moment in which the subject is confronted by the abyss which opens up when it experiences such nausea. When encountering the abject – that which has been “abjected” (from the Latin, abjectere: literally that which has been cast out) – the subject is debased, “thrown down” towards a boundary its existence in the symbolic is premised on forgetting.

The conceptual relation between Bakhtin’s positive grotesque and Kristeva’s negative abjection can furthermore be illustrated through a discussion of the many images and practices which make up grotesque realism in the work of the former, but also fall under the heading of the abject in the work of the latter. Both Bakhtin and Kristeva are interested in
several distinct categories: the margins of the body, the maternal, food, death, and the text. While Bakhtin’s approach to each is characterized by his attempt to reclaim a positive sense of the grotesque, Kristeva, by contrast, tries to explain why the phenomena associated with each of these categories seem to us coarse, disgusting, threatening or obscene. Furthermore, while Kristeva gives an account of abjection in terms of the psyche, Bakhtin sees the contemporary negative view of the grotesque as part of a historical decline into privatized existence. Ultimately, Kristeva’s theory of abjection offers a darker view of the same phenomena that Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque discusses as having positive qualities in carnival: consumption and ejection, merging and uncertain boundaries, excess and license, death and dismemberment.

**Bodily margins**

In terms of bodily margins, Bakhtin claims, the grotesque emphasizes practices of introjection and expulsion as (positive) transgressions. In his view, the open, unfinished nature of the body and its interactions with the world are revealed “most fully and concretely” in the act of eating, because the “body transgresses here its own limits […] Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself” (Bakhtin 1984b: 281). Thus, it is through various bodily junctions – eyes, mouth, nose, anus, vagina, and phallus – that “the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation” (Bakhtin 1984b: 281). In a central passage of *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin describes the most important events in the life of the grotesque body, which all take place in its realm of “interorientation”:

> Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body – all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. (Bakhtin 1984b: 317)

Significantly, each of the activities described here also serves as an example of the abject in terms of Kristeva’s theory. Of eating and drinking she observes that “food loathing” is “perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection”, and provides as an example the revulsion the skin on milk provokes in her: “When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation, and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly” (Kristeva 1982: 2f). The skin on milk can be revolting – and is thus an instance of the grotesque – because it forms the boundary between two elements and two different forms: the
liquid and the solid. It also appears apparently from nowhere, upsetting the idea that milk is an inert substance, making it seem somehow “alive” and liable to mutate (from the Latin mutare: to change form). Furthermore, as a boundary of apparently discrete bodies, it may also remind the drinker of his or her own skin. The effects on the subject are disgusting – that is, potentially disruptive – because its existence depends on maintaining its bodily margins as absolute and inviolable (with few notable exceptions, such as nourishment).

As with the grotesque in general, Kristeva’s interest in the protuberances and convexities which go to make up the margins of the body takes a different form than Bakhtin’s. Rather than simply describe their importance, she traces their significance back to the subject’s constitutive history and identity formation. Maternal authority, according to Kristeva, “shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty […] is impressed and exerted” (Kristeva 1982: 72). Thus, the margins, protuberances, and convexities of the human body are seen not as predetermined but “shaped” by the maternal voice with which they are ever after associated, and therefore rendered potential sites of abjection.

In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin sets up discrete distinctions between grotesque body zones and those which are not grotesque. The eyes, for instance, are not grotesque unless they are protruding. Although they seem to fit the category of marginal organs, they are usually too associated with the individuality of the face, which is too expressive a body part to be grotesque (cf. Bakhtin 1984b: 316). On the other hand, eyes which bulge are grotesque, because the grotesque is “that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body’s confines. Special attention is given [in the grotesque] to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside” (Bakhtin 1984b: 317). In fact, Bakhtin’s vision of the grotesque exalts the “base products” of the body that link it to the world: feces, urine, sperm, and menstrual flow (cf. Stam 1989). Bakhtin also suggests that each of these “products” can stand in for the other, in an unhierarchized way. Kristeva, by contrast, distinguishes these threatening fluids by dividing them into two types, excremental (which includes decay, infection, disease, corpses, etc.) and menstrual, while she excludes some fluids such as tears, which do not “have any polluting value” (Kristeva 1982: 71). Excrement and death, on the one hand, stand for an external threat, whereas menstrual blood represents “the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual)” (Kristeva 1982: 35). The meaning of sperm, however, is far more ambiguous than Kristeva seems to acknowledge when she mentions it alongside tears. Especially considering
the fear of rape and unwanted pregnancy, sperm may well be included as one of the fluids representing an external threat, albeit only from a certain point of view (which, however, is not necessarily female, as the discussion of the *Alien* saga below makes clear).

The internal battle between the classical and the grotesque is also waged in terms of bodily margins and can, in part, be seen as informing the mind-body divide so prevalent in Western thought. The grotesque, according to Bakhtin, draws the confines between “the body and the world and between separate bodies” quite differently from “classical and naturalist images” (Bakhtin 1984b: 315). For the Kristevan subject, maintaining the mind-body distinction is as just vital as insisting on a rigid distinction between surface and substance, avoiding exactly the grotesque permeability and interactivity described (and praised) by Bakhtin when he argues that “the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths” (Bakhtin 1984b: 318). As even a cursory comparison between the two approaches makes obvious, Bakhtin would praise what is feared in the Kristevan abject: the body as capable of transgressing its own boundaries, mixing up inner and outer realms, and recognizing its composition out of the “gay matter” of blood and urine.

**The maternal**

In order to further distinguish between the classical and the grotesque, Bakhtin argues that from the point of view of the classical, the womb is seen as “the earthly element of terror”, while the grotesque sees in it simply new life (cf. Bakhtin 1984b: 91). Since, for Bakhtin, in carnival everything that is terrifying in real life becomes grotesque and thus positively regenerative, he is not concerned with the real aspect of terror. What is subjected to carnivalesque debasement is the “impersonal body” (Bakhtin 1981: 173), as the grotesque image “never presents an individual body” (Bakhtin 1984b: 318). Kristeva, however, starting from the premise that the grotesque can be experienced *only* by an individual body, is interested in why the womb and the maternal are, in fact, seen as terrifying. In this psychoanalytic account of the constitution of the human subject, the maternal, like the symbolic, with its classical outlook is seen as superseding, if imperfectly, the grotesquely oriented semiotic in every individual. Kristeva furthermore emphasizes the threat of the abject to the barely stable symbolic “in its most significant aspect – the prohibition it places on the maternal body” (Kristeva 1982: 155). The frequently grotesque conjunction of reproduction and aging is a prominent example that serves to illustrate the difference between Bakhtin’s and Kristeva’s approach: while Kristeva starts from the fear and loathing associated with it
and bases her analysis of the non-classical body upon it, Bakhtin looks back to a mythic age in which the communal pleasures of feasting and drinking, giving birth and excreting, were allegedly seen as unproblematic and positive.

**The edible**

For Bakhtin, the category of food is an obvious example of a healthy transgression of the body’s confines and the enlargement of the individual’s self. Through the mouth, “man [sic] tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself […]. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man’s [sic] advantage” (Bakhtin 1984b: 281). The related classical fear of confusing food and body, bowels and womb – as in Gargantua’s delivery – is seen by Kristeva as linked to the subject’s incorporation of a “devouring and intolerable mother”, whose interior is associated with excremental decay, and to the subject’s attempt to give birth to itself (cf. Kristeva 1982: 101f). In fact, Kristeva’s primary interest regarding the edible lies in the construction of food taboos and the distinction between what is considered edible and what is not. She focuses on the polluting properties of food and the efforts of clean and proper subjects to avoid excessive contact between the social and the organic represented both by food and by excrement. Again, Kristeva describes those aspects of the grotesque and the classical not as diachronically arranged and separated from each other in historical time, as Bakhtin does, but as coexisting synchronically within each individual subject, which must constantly negotiate between its existence in the symbolic order and the pull to semiotic chaos represented by the abject.

**Death and decay**

As far as carnivalesque death and decay are concerned, Bakhtin claims that “in Rabelais’ novel the image of death is devoid of all tragic or terrifying overtones […]. It is the other side of birth” (Bakhtin 1984b: 39). Like degradation in general, death in carnival is regenerative as well as destructive, digging “a bodily grave for a new birth”. The positive combination of birth and killing is characteristic of Bakhtin’s conception of the historical grotesque, while its contemporary counterpart enacts only the downward movement of degradation. In order to illustrate his point, Bakhtin draws on Rabelais’ account of Gargantua’s delivery, arguing that death is also life because “[t]he caesarean operation kills the mother but delivers the child” (Bakhtin 1984b: 206). In his reading of the Rabelaisian image, Bakhtin focuses on the moment between old and new. The bodies of the old and the new, of the dying and the about-to-be-born are thus “interwoven and begin to be fused in one grotesque image of a devoured and devouring world” (Bakhtin 1984b: 206).
For a modern reader, as Sue Vice puts it, “[t]he very combination of death and birth […] might be a potent moment of abjection: it confuses important boundaries” (Vice 1997: 175). Accordingly, the grotesque combination of death and birth is read by Kristeva as giving rise to an intense fear that the counterpart to the mother’s life-giving abilities is the ability to take life away again. The mother is thus reconfigured as the “devouring” body of the world, the *vagina dentata*. The following passage from Kristeva’s “Powers of Horror” casts the category of death and its textual articulation as perhaps the strongest site of abjection:

[R]efuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live […]. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. (Kristeva 1982: 3).

While most waste products affirm the subject who has converted them into objects, in the case of the corpse a subject has itself *become* waste and been thrown out (read that *abject-ed*). This is not death as part of a life-giving process, as in the grotesque of carnival, but death which threatens the foundations of life in the symbolic order: “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (Kristeva 1982: 4). Kristeva’s view of carnival is thus the exact reverse of Bakhtin’s, in which life, as it were, infects death, and “is included in life” (Bakhtin 1984b: 50).

The text

Finally, the text is seen by both Bakhtin and Kristeva as the most significant site for the carnivalesque and the abject, respectively. For Bakhtin, the truly grotesque body is that of the text itself, in which carnival lives on in transposed form (cf. Vice 1997: 176). Kristeva, too, sees textual forms as the principal site of abjection when she claims that “its signifier, then, is nothing but literature” (Kristeva 1982: 5). A contemporary reading of either hers or Bakhtin’s work, however, must bring with it an understanding of “text” as any product of semiotic practices, and thus includes, among others, the multimodal form of film.

When speaking of filmic text, it is important to bear in mind that Kristeva names religion and other institutions as the main agents responsible for maintaining the boundaries which, when crossed or negated, give rise to what Bakhtin sees as positive for the “ever-regenerating body of the people”, but results in a psychotic crisis for the Kristevan subject. These institutions fulfill their role through “rituals of defilement”, which function “to ward off the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother” (Kristeva 1982: 63). Extending her argument to the discursive formation of mainstream film, one can
begin to describe the ideological work of science fiction films as similar “rituals of defilement”. An account of science fiction’s cultural significance must therefore include not only its ideological relation to its historical context, but also its role in maintaining or reaffirming the dividing line between the symbolic and the semiotic order. In doing so, science fiction films enact and visualize the abject at its most extreme only to then restore and reaffirm the symbolic order by ultimately repressing the abject it initially evoked.

5. A Cinema of Aliens, Cyborgs, and Mutants

Lovecraft applies the term “Outsider” to this thing or entity, the Thing, which arrives and passes at the edge, which is linear yet multiple, “teeming, seething, swelling, foaming, spreading like an infectious disease, this nameless horror.”

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus (1987: 245)

More than any other genre in Western culture, science fiction seems to articulate the body as a space in which difference and otherness are negotiated. This is true of both literary and filmic articulations of the genre, but perhaps even more so in film, where a fetishistic gaze helps to literally turn the body into a battle ground for conflicting forces. In mainstream film, these forces usually take the form of one of the conventional dichotomies of good vs. evil, order vs. chaos, and light vs. darkness. As in most fiction, these are frequently combined in science fiction with gender (male vs. female), sexuality (chaste vs. promiscuous and hetero- vs. homosexual), class (high vs. low) and race (white vs. colored). However, science fiction has the convenient advantage of being able to articulate the category of race as one of species (human vs. alien) and of nature (organic vs. machine), sidestepping any charges of racist tendencies. It is characteristic for mainstream science fiction (perhaps with the exception of cyberpunk and noir films such as Blade Runner) that, in light of the many combinations that are possible within the list of dichotomies given above, the self is associated with most or all of the positive aspects (the “good guys”), while the other is associated with most or all of the negative ones (the “bad guys”). Typically, this already overinscribed other is furthermore articulated as a bodily threat to a self which must defend itself (and its body) by all possible (and often quite impossible) means. The result are frequently texts peopled by evil, anarchic, dark, female aliens or machines (or both) that threaten the bodies of good, lawful, light (usually white), male humans or organic beings. Needless to say, the vast range of texts that could be called “mainstream science fiction” provides exceptions to almost any of the categories mentioned here, whether it is the good machine (the machine that tries to be human), the anarchic rogue who fights for a good cause (an often traumatized outsider), or the
good female (a typically de-sexualized character). The irony of these conventions is that science fiction as a genre with an enormous potential for voicing social critique and envisioning social change (and which is also frequently seen as such, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary), is really the domain of reactionary and repressive champions of the status quo.

The possibilities and conventional limits of film – at least those of mainstream or Hollywood film – add to these general characteristics of science fiction a predilection towards the visual articulation of discursive elements. To this end, any internal struggle between self and other has to be projected onto a surface that can make it visible and it is the human body that most frequently serves as that reflective surface. But, unlike the cinema screen itself, the body is not a blank and neutral surface. It is always already a social construct when it is introduced into the world of science fiction, is itself a product or effect of the socio-cultural context of the film’s production. It is the bodies of the principal characters – usually overinscribed as a result of the film’s conditions of possibility – which become the site for the metaphorical and literal struggle between self and other. This conflict could be called a metaphorical struggle, because filmic depictions of such conflicts are deeply connected to (and articulations of) social anxieties about the other. But it is also a literal struggle, because film as a medium of relatively unmediated narration is much more direct and literal in its articulation of the categories which Bakhtin and Kristeva discussed in relation to literature. Though it is possible to conceive of adequate cinematographic parallels to the literary devices discussed by Bakhtin and Kristeva – such as a visual listing of body parts through camera and editing techniques – the phenomena discussed under the headings of bodily margins, the maternal, the edible, death and dismemberment are only rarely articulated as figurative or merely conceptual in science fiction film.

5.1. The Body as the Final Frontier in Star Trek

Of the many films and television series that qualify for discussion in the terms set out in the above, the Star Trek franchise in its televisual and cinematic forms merits special attention for two prominent characteristics. The first is its long-standing and close connection with U.S. society – a relationship that is unusually apparent in its aspects as both product as well as producer of social change. The second is its general setting on “the final frontier” of mankind. Star Trek, in other words, is all about territories, borders, and boundaries of every kind. To quote but one example pertinent to the issues at stake here, the Star Trek franchise or “universe”, as it is affectionately called by its fans, has a long tradition of addressing issues of
multiculturalism, xenophobia, and racism through the composition of its crew, especially its bridge crew. Thus, the original series not only featured the Anglo-American Captain Kirk, but also the African-American communication officer Ms. Uhura, the Asian navigation officer Mr. Zulu, and, perhaps most outrageously at the time, the Russian armory officer Mr. Chekhov.ix

In order to suggest the cultural significance of the crew’s composition in the late 1960ies, one need only point out an anecdote frequently told by the cast of the original series as well as the fan community. It concerns a particularly memorable Star Trek convention at which Nichelle Nicols, the African American actress playing Lieutenant Uhura, was approached by Dr. Martin Luther King. Dr. King, the story has it, introduced himself and proceeded to congratulate Nichols on the importance of what she was doing and pointed out to her what she herself had not realized until then: the fact that the first kiss between a black woman and a white man ever to be aired on U.S. television had been between her character and Captain Kirk. In terms of self and other, then, Star Trek has always tried to include the socio-cultural and historical other of U.S. society, be it racial, cultural, or political. Such a process of inclusion, however, always generates an empty space in the mutually constitutive structure of self and other. For this place to be filled and the self to be reconstituted, the diegetic world of the fiction must bring forth a new other, which in the case of science fiction is usually an alien, that is, extra-terrestrial or not human other.

The Star Trek franchise has repeatedly incorporated the other for what may have been egalitarian motives, but it has done so at the cost of assimilating the other into the ship’s collective or communal self. Naturally enough for the genre, the new other provided by the original series was an alien species, the Klingons, a decidedly far Eastern looking species and culture, with dark skin and strong Mongolian features. The Klingons took the place of what the Soviet Union was to the U.S. American mind-set at that point in history: a cunning political and military foe that had to be rebuked time and again, but could never be entirely defeated. In the course of the Star Trek feature films, however, even the boundaries to this new other began to be contested and gradually became blurred. This process finally assumed clear forms in the sixth feature film, Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country, in which the once so evil Klingon Empire is (almost) ready to admit, if not inferiority and ultimate defeat, at least its need for the good United Federation of Planet’s help and assistance. This happened at roughly the same historical moment when the old enmities of the Cold War were beginning to thaw in the era of Glasnost, with the Klingon political elite exhibiting the same internal dividedness about this development as the leadership of the Soviet Union. These
developments were taken up and gradually brought to something of a conclusion in the course of the television sequel to the original series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which followed upon the heels of the sixth feature film. With a new crew and ship, the re-launched *Star Trek* franchise would once again begin the process of incorporating an other, only this time it was one internal to the *Star Trek* universe itself, an other that was already a displacement of the originally incorporated others of race, gender, and nationality. The new series painstakingly focused, time and again, on the difficulties of the Klingon other that had been brought into the collective self of the crew. Worf, the one character embodying these conflicts, effectively spends some 200 episodes half-resisting, half-assimilating to the communal self of the Enterprise crew.

Of course, there were also old and new others on the Enterprise bridge besides Worf: an African-American engineer, an alien counselor (from Betazed), and the android Mr. Data. The captain, however, was now even more decidedly white, Anglo, and upper class than ever before; with Patrick Steward as Captain Jean-Luc Picard, the Enterprise crew was now in the hands of a very British character, fond of quoting Shakespeare and enjoying his cup of Earl Grey tea, hot. The other could thus be comfortably contained, even at those moments when it could not be entirely incorporated or assimilated. Again, with the old (Klingon) other gone, the self that U.S. America had given itself in the world of *Star Trek* had to be defined in relation to a new other, and again this other was to be an alien other. It was, however, also to be part machine. Accordingly, the name of this new other, the “Borg”, is derived from the designation of what they ultimately are: cyborgs. The Borg are part organic and part machine and their bodies thus transgress the dividing line between human and machine which, as Donna Haraway (1991) has argued, is only imaginative, but nonetheless crucial to the dominant conception of what it means to be human.

The episode *Q-Less* first introduced the Enterprise crew and its audience to this new other, an other that was to become the focus of the feature film *Star Trek VIII: First Contact* some ten years later. But the Borg were more than simply a replacement for the old racial or ethnic other of the original series. By virtue of their ability to erase and to assimilate subjectivity, distinctiveness, and individuality into their collective “hive” mind, the Borg became the ultimate enemy of *Star Trek*’s vision of humanity. Remarkably, by creating the Borg, those in charge of the *Star Trek* franchise also seem to have responded to anxieties about *Star Trek*’s own tendency to incorporate the other. They did so by defining *Star Trek*’s self, seemingly once and for all, in opposition to an other threatening to assimilate everything it comes in contact with. While previously the body of the other had been marked mainly by
racial properties, this new turn changed the terms of the relationship between self and other by making actual bodies the site of conflict. Because the Borg other is capable of assimilating *Star Trek*’s human self only by implanting technology into the body – literally and physically penetrating, invading the body – the battle between self and alien other is fought not so much with starships but inside the body. While, in principle, every body is as much the site of this struggle, quasi-mythic discourses such as Hollywood film tend to reduce such epic struggles to a much smaller scale, which, in the case science fiction, usually means a single body. The *Star Trek* franchise provides an intriguing example of this tendency of personalizing a much larger conflict. It is none other than Captain Picard himself, the *pater familias* of the Enterprise crew, who is abducted by the Borg to be assimilated. The plot thus foregrounds the threat of the other to the white Anglo-American male self by practically excluding the rest of the Enterprise crew from the struggle between self and other as Picard is made to stand in for all of “humanity”.

As has already been suggested, the violation of the self is portrayed as mainly physical in *Star Trek*. It is a transgression of the self as body or body as self, and is mental or psychological only indirectly through the cybernetic devices that are implanted and remain, scar-like, part of Picard’s body. The real violation, as Picard’s later comments make clear, is that every trace of his (cultural) identity was erased in the process of the other’s invasion of his body. As might be expected, there are strong sexual overtones to this violation and intrusion, and there is furthermore a strong sense of homophobia as there seem to be, at least at this point, no females in the Borg collective. Appropriately, Picard is rescued from the grasp of this male other by the efforts of two males belonging to the Enterprise crew, namely Riker and Data. Significantly, this becomes possible only after another gender conflict – this one between first officer William Riker and an up-and-coming female officer of the same rank – has been decided in Riker’s favor. The role of the Data in this episode deserves closer attention, as he is clearly a positive embodiment of the machine. More generally, Data is a modern-day version of Pinocchio, the inorganic but somehow animate matter that strives to be human, to become “a real boy”. In the context of their struggle against the Borg other, Data and Picard form a pair that gives the episode its name: *The Best of Both Worlds*. But not only are the world of the human and the world of the machine thus embodied by the two characters, they are ultimately reconciled when Data saves Picard by connecting to the machine part in him and somehow manages to reach his human self (which, after all, only seems to have been submerged, rather than entirely erased). This reconciliation, however,
depends on a reaffirmation of the boundaries between the two “worlds”, on keeping the human and the machine apart.\textsuperscript{xiii}

In the televisual struggles between the Enterprise and the Borg, it is predominantly bodily margins that define the self against a threatening other. Furthermore, the maternal appears prominently in two connected but non-identical versions of the devouring mother: the ominous shape of the Borg ship on the one hand and the identity-erasing Borg collective on the other. Needless to say, not only is Picard restored to his former “self”, but the threat of the other is itself destroyed when Data manages to hack into the “mind” of the Borg ship and puts it to sleep. He thus exposes the collective Borg body to human invasion, at which point it self-destructs rather than allowing the human self to enter its body. Significantly, this is precisely what the Enterprise crew opts for when the positions of self and other are reversed in \textit{Star Trek VIII: First Contact}.

Bodily fluids, on the other hand, are generally not very salient in \textit{Star Trek}. While the Borg body is, of course, repulsive in its internal transgression of the human/machine divide, it is not abject to the same degree as, for instance, the body of the alien other in the \textit{Alien} saga or the 1982 version of \textit{The Thing}. The Borg’s skin does, however, show signs of accelerated decay, which – together with their shambling gait, perpetually outstretched arms, and mindless facial expression – links the Borg to the undead figure of the zombie. Only with their appearance on the big screen in 1996 did the Borg “evolve” (as they themselves put it) to include other forms of the abject, further heightening the salience of the forever repeated violation of the human body by the technological.

\textbf{Contexts}

As has already been suggested, the myths that U.S. society has been telling itself via the textual and discursive practices of the \textit{Star Trek} franchise have preserved the contradictions at the same time as they have “resolved” them in another medium and through another modality. Thus, making the Russian Mr. Chekov part of a Federation of Planets closely modeled on the U.S. is one of the more obvious imaginary resolutions of contextual contradictions which are, in fact, a precondition for the every existence of \textit{Star Trek}.

In a Lévi-Straussian analyses of the \textit{Star Trek: TNG} episodes that feature the Borg, one could employ the diagrammatic representation of Greimas’ semiotic square, investing $S_1$ with the semantic content /human/, which would result in $S_2 = \text{/anti-human/}$, $-S_1 = \text{/not-human/}$, and $-S_2 = \text{/not-antihuman/}$\textsuperscript{xiii}
According to Lévi-Strauss, the oppositions retained by the text necessarily point to the socio-cultural context of the society that give rise to it. In the case of the *Star Trek* episodes in question, the historical moment in which they were articulated as imaginary resolutions to real contradictions can be characterized as one of crisis. Under the shadow of Reaganomics and recession, working class identity in the U.S. of the 1980ies became acutely threatened by the devaluation of manufacture and manual labor through the rise of multinational corporations and their ability to shift production to low-wage countries, the influx of immigrant labor, and the increasing automatization of production processes.

Thus, while the struggle against another that is part human and part machine appears as a self-evident necessity to an audience focused on action and suspense, it is also an ideological maneuver that serves to reassert the values of patriarchy and white, Anglo-American supremacy during a period of acute economic and multicultural transformation of U.S. society. At the surface structure of the text, another is invented as an external threat, which is then made to stand in for the historical threat to white male working class identity. Whatever the logical motivations in the diegetic world of the narrative, in going “where no man has gone before” the Enterprise crew is also engaged at the symbolic or cultural level, reaffirming rather than extending frontiers and margins of what it takes to be its self.

However, what that has been said so far regarding the Borg and their role as the other in the late 1980ies changes as soon as one’s attention turns from the television series to the eighth *Star Trek* feature film, *First Contact* (1996). The film opens with an uncanny dream sequence in which Picard is back with the Borg (he is one of them, one *with* them in the uterus of the Borg ship), reliving the violation of his body (a syringe is repeatedly seen penetrating his right eye). He wakes from his dream only to look helplessly at his reflection in a mirror as he is penetrated *from within* by the Borg implants he still carries with him like the scars of old wounds. His body thus functions like the body invoked by de Certeau, written by the other, carrying the wounds of his torment as the only viable proof of the other. Equally, his body can be read as the text that contains the Borg’s cybernetic implants much like a Lévi-Straussian “residue” of the contradictions that are the film’s real conditions of possibility. Picard wakes a
second time, this time for real, only to learn that the Borg have returned in force and are headed for Earth. The rest of the movie reiterates the myth of the encounter between self and other as a struggle over the body, but in doing so makes significant changes to the story that was told in the television series.

After the Enterprise follows the Borg into the past to stop them from overwhelming a defenseless Earth, the Enterprise’s shields drop for a moment, just long enough for some of the Borg to beam over unnoticed and just in time before their ship is destroyed. Again, there is an invasion of the maternal body of a starship, this time that of the Enterprise, which the Borg immediately begin to assimilate, turning the ship itself into a larger version of the other. This transgression goes unnoticed for some time, long enough for the Enterprise crew to know, as soon as they realize the integrity of their ship has been compromised, that they are fighting a losing battle. In one of the skirmishes that ensue, the spectator gets a closer look at how the Borg assimilate human crew members. They do so, not, as had previously been shown, by simply replacing parts of their bodies, but by punctuating, vampire-like, the victim’s skin by means of two tentacle-like extensions of their body and injecting microscopic “nano-bots” into the victim’s body. In fact, one of these victims is shown in close-up, begging Picard to “help” him by killing him before he becomes one of them, his skin rapidly decaying, rotting away as his body is turned into the abject other. Apparently, death is a fate preferable to living with the other growing inside one’s own body, re-writing it as the text that de Certeau describes as the only viable proof of the other. Needless to say, Picard mercifully saves the crewman in question from becoming the other that he himself has once been.

It is at roughly this point in the film that Data is captured by the Borg. He is subsequently strapped to a chair that bears an uncanny resemblance to a torture rack and comes face to face with an inconsistency in the portrayal of the Borg that neither he nor the film can make any sense of. The Borg now appear to have a leader, a Queen, who speaks for them, controls them, and is thus their Achilles’ heel. She is also, however, a highly sexualized temptress. In the course of the film, she writes ample proof of the other on Data’s body, exposing him to all the temptations of the flesh. Her strategy in this is twofold, and both aspects of it clearly pose a threat to the Star Trek self: the first enacts a transgression of the human/machine division as the Queen gives the android Data “flesh and blood” and thus brings him “closer to humanity”. Data appears to acquiesce and his body is turned into an abject intermediate state, no longer either fully human or fully machine. Just like the Borg other, Data becomes a compound, an em-bodied transgression that visually and conceptually resembles Frankenstein’s monster. The second part of the Borg Queen’s strategy takes the
form of aggressive female sexuality and is actually more intimidating, more threatening to Data than her other stratagem. Thus, *First Contact* makes explicit on the textual level what was only implied by the television series: the identity that is being threatened by the technological other of the Borg is not only working class but also male. As such, it had been threatened in the two *Best of Both Worlds* episodes by the ambitious, up-and-coming female commander whom Riker had to “snap back so hard she’d think she was a first year cadet again”; who, in other words, had to be relegated to her proper place in the male order. In *Star Trek VIII: First Contact*, on the other hand, more fully aligns the female (and potentially disruptive female sexuality) with the other, allowing Picard to combat both the technological and the gendered other at the same time and in the same body.\textsuperscript{15}

In terms of Greimas’ semiotic square, the distribution of semes among individual characters in the feature film is thus more complex than in the television series. Even the most rudimentary analysis of *First Contact* involves at least two layers of interdependent homologies. Thus, Picard is not only /human/ as in the homology underlying the television episodes, but also /male/ in the homology operating at a second level. This second semiotic square is generated by the binary opposition of /male/ vs. /female/, with Picard and the Borg Queen as its most prominently embodiments. The complementary binary pair of this second homology presents itself in terms of sexuality: Picard is known for his restraint with women (at most receiving a casual kiss on the cheek) whereas the Borg Queen’s aggressive and threatening sexuality is dangerous and tempting even to the android Data.

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As becomes apparent in the attempt to locate Data in either homology forming the structures of opposition in *First Contact* readily reveals, the struggle between the two positions – that of the self as /human/ and /male/ and that of the other as /not human/ and /female/ – seems to revolve around Data’s ambiguous position within the fields of opposition. In terms of such an analysis, Data seems to resist assignment to any of these positions: he is /not human/ but is he also /anti-human/? Since he is /male/, is he also /sexually inactive/? Indeed, the surface level of the text also reflects this underlying struggle, as both self and other try to win over Data to their side. The role of Data’s ambiguous position in both homologies as the turning point of
the entire film is motivated diegetically since he is the only character in possession of the encryption code that allows unrestricted access to the Enterprise’s main computer. The film’s element of suspense hinges on the fact that Data appears to be on the side of the other until the very end of the film, at which point he violently turns the tables on the Borg Queen. Even at this moment, however, his appropriation of the Borg tag-line “Resistance is futile” reveals his relative proximity to the other. Data then undergoes a form of purgatory when he plunges into the liquid plasma which burns away his newly given flesh and thus frees his body of the (textual) proof, the “residue” of the contradiction he has become: a transgression between human and machine which, for reasons that can be traced to the socio-cultural context of the text, the film has to safeguard and reaffirm if it is to speak to its audience. As the machine that tries to be human (in spirit, but not in body), Data can be tolerated, even accepted into the communal self of the crew, as long as his failure is assured and inevitable. It then articulates a continual affirmation of the division between the (human) self and the (machine) other.

5.2. Violations of the Body in the Alien Saga

The problematic status of the machine and its relation to the other discussed here is one of many touching points between the Star Trek franchise and the Alien saga. While not much science fiction can boast a history as long as that of Star Trek, or even more than a single installment on the big screen, Ridley Scott’s sci-fi horror classic Alien (1979) and the three sequels it inspired are one of the few exceptions. Although the four films belonging to the Alien saga were neither written by the same scriptwriters nor directed by the same person, they nevertheless share several significant elements, including their protagonist Lieutenant Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and the alien creature designed by H. R. Giger.

Thus, the Alien films have in common a conflict between the same bodily self and other, while the setting and terms of that struggle alternate between deep space and planetary colonies. In either case, however, the human community struggling for survival against the threat of the alien other is portrayed as completely isolated and closed in on itself. Significantly, the alien other encountered by the human comunitas in these remote settings is defined almost exclusively through its bodily qualities: black, smooth and deadly, it is the ultimate threat to the bodily self of the human community. In terms of the alien other, there has been both remarkable continuity and significant change in the course of the Alien saga. On the one hand, the various bodily shapes and forms given to this threat have remained the same over the last 20 or so years and, remarkably, have lost none of their horrific poignancy. On the other hand, the other – its alien nature and attributes, its body and life-cycle – has been
articulated (through its actions and in dialogue) in distinct ways in the four *Alien* movies. These articulations have variously (though never arbitrarily) emphasized connotations of invasion and the penetration of borders, of viral contagion, or rape at specific moments in history. This variation in the connotations attached to the alien other – not so much by work of interpretation but through the textual work of the films themselves – suggests that this alien other is something more contingent than the primordial fear of a deadly predator. The contingency of these articulations of the alien other can be described as a function of the socio-cultural context of the respective film, the specific conditions of possibility of its production.

**The alien body**

The presence of the abject in the guise of the alien creature and its practices is perhaps the strongest continuity of the *Alien* films, alongside a ubiquitous sense of claustrophobia and the looming presence of anonymous authoritarian systems. As a species, the alien creature is peculiarly multimorph in the course of its life-cycle, which is divided into distinct stages and equally distinct bodies. The alien other’s apparently most primitive form is the so-called “face-hugger” which, after a period of embryonic gestation, emerges from a leathery egg-like container laid by the queen. The parallels between the alien other and insectoid life – the films themselves name ants and bees as parallels – are further reinforced by the hive-like organization of the species and its habitat. Like *Star Trek*’s Borg, the individual members of this alien other act in silent and efficient accord, while the drones are easily replaced and controlled by the queen. After the face-hugger emerges from the egg, it seeks out a host creature to which it attaches and which it then incorporates into the alien other’s life-cycle, not simply as food but as a host for the embryo of the next and final stage of its life cycle.

Although the life cycle of the alien is continuously emphasized and foregrounded by all the *Alien* films, the spectator never learns whether there are biological sexes in the species, whether the queen is actually female and the adult drones male. By virtue of their physical appearance alone, however, the various shapes assumed by the alien other are highly suggestive of both phallic and vaginal properties. In the form of the face-hugger, for instance, the alien combines both phallic and vaginal characteristics: it has a phallic tail and an equally phallic tentacle that it slides down the victim’s throat to place the embryo, while the underside of its body is explicitly vaginal. The adult alien’s tongue, on the other hand, is an unambiguously phallic object, used time and again in the four films to penetrate the human body. In fact, *Alien: Resurrection* seems to acknowledge the phallic quality of the alien’s...
tongue by including a castration motif in which Ripley offers an alien’s tongue, severed like a sexual organ, as a trophy to Call (Wynona Ryder). The issue of the other’s biological gender and its procreational sexuality is furthermore complicated by the acts through which the human body, regardless of biological gender, is incorporated into the alien life cycle as host (in which the embryo hibernates and grows like a baby) and which later gives birth, if involuntarily, to the so-called “chest-burster” form of the alien. As the other can only be understood in its relationship to the self, the phallic, rape-like penetrations of the human body enacted by both face-hugger and chest-burster suggest that the other is male insofar as it forces a role onto the self that is grotesque form of motherhood. As several critics have pointed out, this aspect of the films lends itself to an interpretation of the alien other as a metaphor for “non-consensual sexuality”, that is, rape.xix

However, it is not sufficient to simply read the alien other of the Alien films as a textual metaphor, a notion which suggests a more or less conscious and direct relationship between the thing as such and its representation, signifier and signified. As cultural codes of the other, articulations of the alien in science fiction are never a matter of simple analogy or metaphor. Instead, they often arise in convoluted form from specific socio-cultural contexts, the concrete conditions of possibility of any articulation of the relationship between the self and the other. As has already been suggested, in the case of the Alien films, these articulations have varied considerably over the years – just as their cultural conditions of possibility have varied – while the presence of the abject as the visual form of the alien other has remained remarkable stable. In light of the continuity of this presence and its visual articulation, which shares significant aspects with that of the Borg in Star Trek (and the alien others of many other films one could draw on in order to supplement this reading), it may be possible to begin to outline a dialectic relationship between Kristeva’s universalistic theory of abjection and Grossberg’s contextualist project of cultural studies.

The Abject

Over the last 15 years or so, a conjunction of psychoanalytic and feminist approaches have produced numerous readings of the Alien films that partly deal with several of the aspects considered here, even though the Kristevan abject has been conspicuously absent from the discussion so far. Creed (1993), for instance, mentions Alien as one example in her discussion of how patriarchal culture projects its fear of castration onto women, creating women that are monstrous (or monsters which are female). Initially, the only thing to attract critical attention in Alien seems to have been the scene in which Ripley strips to her underwear just before the
final attack of the alien other. This was described as an example of the “gratuitous sexism” of a film which, “true to a two hundred year old tradition of gothic horror […] relies for its most gut-wrenching effects on the spectacle of a helpless beautiful woman threatened with violence by an unspeakable, inhuman, but quintessentially masculine horror” (Cobbs 1990: 199).

However, Cobbs (1990) did acknowledge that the Alien films might merit serious feminist analysis by conceding that they were also “about gestation and birth”. In fact, the essays published as part of Kuhn’s (1990) anthology on science fiction cinema, dealing with the body primarily under considerations of gender and sexuality, put the Alien saga firmly on the agenda of critical analysis. Creed’s (1993) study, for instance, shifted the prevalent focus of analysis from Ripley’s body to the even more spectacular body of the alien itself, the “woman-as-monster” which she defined as “a complex representation of the monstrous-feminine as archaic mother” (Creed 1993: 65). Approximating, in Kristevan terms, the maternal abject, Creed argued that the alien queen is in fact an articulation of the parthenogenic mother, the mother who, by giving life and taking it away, represents the threat of the vagina dentata. In short, the list of critical readings is extensive and diverse, and many of them intersect with the Kristevan trajectory of analysis proposed here.

Remarkably, the Alien films do not simply depend on articulations of the abject for the horror they evoke, but also manage to orchestrate a remarkable convergence of all the categories discussed by Kristeva as abjection. In a single sequence, centering on the moment that the alien emerges from the chest of its first victim (John Hurt), Scott’s Alien succeeds in visually combining a violation of bodily margins (the body has previously been invaded and is now violently ruptured), the maternal (the body has served as host, has nurtured and protected the alien, and now gives birth to it), the edible (the crew is gathered for a meal at this point, and John Hurt has just lifted a spoonful of food to his mouth so that at first there seems to be something wrong with the food), death (the human body dies at the same moment the alien other is born, resulting in the abject combination of the moment of birth and death), and the text (the body and the wounds it receives are the only textual proof that the crew have of the existence of the other). Many of these elements, such as the bursting of the alien through the host’s chest, are repeated throughout the Alien saga, but they are also inflected, made to mean different things. In Alien: Resurrection, for instance, the chest of the human self is never shown being violated from within: the sight is repeatedly blocked or averted in one way or another. In one instance, the alien embryo is surgically removed from Ripley’s body and the violation is thus enacted not by the alien other. In another case, another
person’s head not only obscures the line of sight but also falls victim to the chest-bursting alien.

A further continuity and one of many touching points between the Star Trek franchise and the Alien saga is the role of the machine and its relation to self and other. In both groups of texts, it is the figure of the android that embodies the fundamental contradiction between human and machine; in both, the android’s body serves as the text on which the other is painfully written. In the original Alien (1979), for instance, the android Ash (Ian Holm) occupies a critical position in terms of both the plot and of the four-term homology structuring the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human</th>
<th>Anti-human</th>
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<tr>
<td>Not-anti-human</td>
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While the alien other is obviously /Not-human/ and therefore /Anti-human/, Ash initially seems to be /Human/ and therefore also /Not-anti-human/. Significantly, Ripley’s discovery of the android’s treachery (he is /Anti-human/) coincides with the realization that he is furthermore /Not-Human/. In the diegetic world of Alien, and by extension also in the mind of Ripley, the one automatically and necessarily entails the other. In fact, subplots in all three sequels engage more or less critically with the alleged correspondence between the machine and the other. Ash, however, is aligned unambiguously with the alien as other and works consciously against the crew’s efforts to defeat the alien. Significantly, he is moreover a representative of the anonymous and clockwork-like corporation that employs Ripley and the rest of the crew. Similar authoritarian systems are also present in the later Alien films and are always portrayed as inhuman – a term that, at least in the diegesis of the Alien saga, seems to include the meaning of both /Not-Human/ and /Anti-Human/.

Aligned with the alien other, the machine and the corporation are thus cast as a threatening other that must also be defeated.

While the principal and most salient forms of abjection are clearly connected to the bodily self of the alien other, these are far from being the only articulations of abjection in the Alien saga. Rather, they are reinforced and echoed by a number of elements throughout the saga, most of which suggest either a violation of bodily margins, the maternal, or death and decay.
The first of these categories, the violation of some form of body associated with the human self – be it the spaceship Nostromo, a planetary colony, an isolated community, or actual human bodies – is characteristic of the moment of crisis in all the *Alien* films. The most prominent example is, perhaps, the face-hugger’s insertion of the alien embryo into the human body. Significantly, in order to do so the alien attaches to the face – a part of the body that Bakhtin has described as closely related to the image of the self – and thus temporarily erases the victim’s individuality and humanity. From a psychoanalytical point of view, this erasure of the self can, of course, also be read as an Oedipal moment of castration. But there are further bodies that need to be considered here, bodies that serve as extensions of and substitutes for the human self and which equally become a site of the struggle between self and other. Consider, for instance, the fierce discussion that ensues before the alien other attached to its first victim is allowed to enter the body of the ship in *Alien*, which is possible only because there is a (non-human, android) traitor on the inside. Or else, consider as an echo or repetition of this the violation enacted when the other enters the body of the settlers’ housing structure in *Aliens* (1986), or the prison complex in *Alien*³ (1993). In all the films of the *Alien* saga, considerable emphasis is placed on things and practices that delineate borders and margins: doors, hatches, barricading breaches of all kinds, walling oneself off from the other, and defending the territory of the self.

On a different level of bodily abstraction, once the alien other has overcome the obstacles mentioned above and invaded the structures associated with the self, it sets about penetrating actual human bodies, wresting from them first consciousness, control, and ultimately life. In the course of this process, many of the other’s victims are turned into cocoons that serve as hosts for the growing alien young. In this abject state, they appear as versions of the living dead not unlike the Borg drones in *Star Trek*. Apparently, once the alien has violated the body of its victim, it is changed from *one of us* into *one of them*. Thus, whenever the main protagonists encounter victims in such a state of abjection, their reactions of disgust and resentment outweigh the desire to save them. In *Aliens*, the cocooned victims, already invaded by the other that now feeds on them, ask to be saved, beg to be killed just like the Borg’s victims do in *Star Trek VIII: First Contact*. Death, in these fictions, is obviously preferable to continue to live with the other growing inside one’s own body; it is the “fortunate shipwreck” that de Certeau describes as the body’s only escape from being written by the other.
As has already been suggested, the variability of the contexts in which the alien creature of the *Alien* saga has been articulated as the other has resulted in a variety of distinct forms and articulations. Perhaps most importantly, the films belonging to the saga have blended a number of (traditionally male) genres – horror, science fiction, the prison movie, the war movie – to different degrees. Bearing in mind the generic properties of these forms and their respective impact on the *Alien* films, one can begin to understand how the versatile image created by the first movie could be appropriated and rearticulated in subsequent socio-cultural contexts. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the *Alien* saga is the fact that the same visual realizations of the abject could be used to articulate and re-articulate radically different issues over the past 25 years. In the course of these years, the alien other has been articulated as or together with an other that includes ideologies, anonymous authoritarian systems, ethnic groups, homosexual men, and even the victims of the HIV virus.

The alien as a cultural code for illegal aliens from South and Latin America immigrating to the United States of 1980s and 1990s is most visible in *Aliens*, a film which portrays the invasion of a human colony by an undetectable and deadly other. As the film’s articulation of the self, the human colonizers are, of course, white Anglo-Saxons, while the invading other is articulated as the alien creature. The lines of effectivity connecting the film as a textual product to the xenophobic tendency in U.S. society are furthermore reinforced by the dual use of the word “alien” in the English language – which is used in the film to refer to Mexican immigrants and the murderous alien creature alike.

By the time the third *Alien* film was produced, anxieties concerning the HIV virus on the one hand and related surges of homophobia on the other had begun to take hold of U.S. society. And, unlike the previous installments of the series, *Alien³* articulates the alien other as both the carrier of a virus and as the virus itself. After Ripley crash-lands near an isolated penal colony, a number of features in the text direct attention to the threat of disease and contagion. The first of these is the reason given by Ripley when she asks that an autopsy be performed on the body of the girl: the threat of cholera, a highly contagious epidemic. Ripley’s reference to cholera is an obvious displacement, as she knows or suspects the (unnamed, unnamable) other to have been the cause of death. Also on an explicit level, there is a focus on blood as a potential carrier of the alien other and several characters are tested for it as for a viral infection. Another potential carrier substance of the HIV virus is present prominently in the form of the alien creature’s saliva, which the third film emphasizes much more than its precursors. In addition, the characters themselves comment on several HIV-related issues such as the unsafe sex practiced by Ripley and Clement, or the penal colony as
a place where “there are no women and no condoms”. By virtue of this comment and the constant threat of male violence and rape that attends the male convicts and wardens at the colony, the film equally suggests homosexuality and connects it implicitly to the threat of contagion.

As Amy Taubin has observed, *Alien 3* thus articulates, among other things, “whatever images surface on your dream screen when what’s really terrifying you is AIDS” (Taubin 1993: 134). But, as might be expected, the third installment of the *Alien* saga is not the only science fiction film to articulate the other in conjunction with the threat of the HIV virus. In fact, there exists a long line of films that could be discussed in this regard. This tradition was arguably initiated by John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982) and, considering such recent examples as *The Astronaut’s Wife* (1999), shows no sign of weakening. This last example, in particular, merits some attention here, primarily because it connects the alien other as viral infestation to issues of sexuality and procreation. Superficially, the film’s plot seems familiar enough: an alien species wants to take over Earth by “snatching” human bodies from their proper owners, depriving them of control, intelligence, and ultimately life. The story begins when an astronaut returns from a failed mission and no one (but the spectator, of course) notices he has been infected. In the course of the next few months, he impregnates his wife and, since their offspring are also infected, the alien other threatens to begin to spread over the world. As the astronaut’s wife slowly begins to realize what is happening, the contamination of her husband effectively disrupts their normal love-life and the trust they shared. By portraying (unguarded) sexual intercourse as the cause of infection, *The Astronaut’s Wife* aligns the alien other even more directly with the HIV virus than the *Alien* saga.

Generally speaking, the fourth film of the *Alien* saga, *Alien: Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997), is far more ambiguous and even downright deconstructive in its portrayal of bodies than its precursors. Featuring a clone of Ripley, whose own genes have been mixed up with alien DNA, the film’s opening credits expose the spectator to the abject in its most extreme form: a pulsing mass of organic material that lacks all form, all shape, all the boundaries between self and (alien) other which the Kristevan subject so desperately depends on. In the course of the film, the alien aspect of Ripley’s character is continually emphasized as she looks and acts in the manner of the other, sniffing around and fighting with animal strength. However, this seemingly positive (if never entirely innocent) portrayal of a blurring of the boundaries between self and other within the body of the protagonist is completely reversed when Ripley literally encounters her self. As she enters one of the laboratories on board the ship on which she has been “resurrected”, she is faced with the remains of the
scientists’ less fortunate attempts to create a clone of her. The corpses she sees preserved in formaldehyde are bodily composites of her self and the alien other, hideous and abject in their transgression of the bodily margins that ought to separate the two. They are texts, too, bodies written by the other. In the case of *Alien: Resurrection*, the other that provides this textual proof appears as a temporary and never stable conjunction of the alien other and the group of “inhuman” human scientists working for an equally inhuman authoritarian system. One of the bodies Ripley faces, though no less deformed than the others, is somehow alive and well enough to beg the (visually, physically intact) Ripley to kill her. Ripley, whose self is clearly threatened by this confrontation with an abject self that is somehow also her self, complies by setting fire to the entire laboratory. A cleansing fire engulfs the abject bodies and washes over the textual surface of the film until the only thing that survives is a self reaffirmed in its bodily margins, a self that carries the residues of the other as internal contradictions that do not visibly transfigure the body.

Near its end, and almost as an afterthought, the film introduces another instance in a long line of transgressions: a body that visibly, abjectedly transgresses all bodily margins and thus cannot be allowed to exist. After Ripley falls into the womb (as it were) of the alien queen, lying embedded in a mass of alien limbs and phlegm that seem to threaten to absorb her body, the queen gives birth to a new alien. Since this new creature has adapted some human features and is no longer entirely other, it too visibly em-body the contradiction that Ripley is able to contain and conceal within her body. Its destruction is thus unavoidable if the film is to offer an imaginary resolution to the real conflict between self and other.

### 5.3. Seeing and Telling the Difference in *The Thing*

Even at first glance, it seems remarkable that Hollywood would have produced two radically different films based on the same story. As it is, both *The Thing From Another World* (1951) by Howard Hawks and *The Thing* (1982) by John Carpenter are film versions of John W. Campbell’s 1938 novella *Who Goes There?* Unlike both the *Star Trek* franchise and the *Alien* saga, however, the subject matter of *The Thing* was not continuously updated and adapted to the changing socio-cultural context in the course of the 30 years that passed between its two cinematic appearances. Thus, while the interval in this case is longer than the time-span covered by the *Alien* saga and smaller than that covered by *Star Trek*, the shift from the thing of 1951 to that of 1982 seems the most striking, the most pronounced and abrupt in the three groups of films.
Both cinematic appearances of the “thing” coincide roughly with two distinct socio-cultural moments in the history of the United States: the early stages of the cold war in the 1950s and the time when the magnitude of the AIDS epidemic was slowly being realized in the early 1980s. Thus, it is relatively easy to recognize in Hawk’s portrayal of a struggle against an identifiable other the anxieties of U.S. society about the threat of communism. Carpenter’s film, on the other hand, is infused with the fear of infection and physical contact, pointing to AIDS and the related surge of homophobia that occurred in the 1980s. The two films achieve their distinct effects by deploying a number of cinematic techniques – virtually opposing stylistic devices – rather than through variations in what is after all more or less the same story. As a major point of difference, the original film merely reflects the paranoia of its society on the level of dialogue and plot (fear of atomic power gone haywire, of communism, of unrestrained sexuality), but does not convey that paranoia by re-creating diegetic paranoia among its characters. Rather, its characters deal with an other (the “thing”) that inspires among them, at worst, a temporary feeling of anxiety. They are a unified group who very successfully and very calmly defeat an intruder that is entirely alien, entirely “other”, and furthermore clearly identifiable.

One of the more specific ways in which The Thing From Another World (1951) effectively counteracts the possibility of diegetic paranoia is by allowing its characters to immediately recognize and understand the alien other. In fact, one of the scientists is able to provide explanations of the alien and its spacecraft as soon as they are discovered, and his arguments are accepted by the crew as facts beyond the shadow of a doubt. Once the other is known, defeating it becomes a simple matter of adapting the crew’s “Standard Operating Procedure”: the collective human self is thus able to devise a plan and execute it (and the alien other) successfully, without ever exposing themselves to serious danger. The crew’s confidence and unity is furthermore reflected in their environment. The inside of the base camp is uncluttered, well-lit, and does not obscure the characters with distracting set pieces or high contrast lighting. The film’s mise en scène is just as clean, never suggesting anxiety by framing the characters in tight, obscuring close-ups or through canted angles and chiaroscuro lighting. Even in the darker parts of the camp, visual composition remains open and accessible through to the predominant use of medium long and long shots. As a result, the base camp’s interior, which serves as the setting for most of the film, at all times appears as supportive of the human crew, promising a return to normalcy, a return to a state before the (re-)emergence of the repressed other.
Fear of the other is furthermore reduced by the film’s display of the crew’s efficient teamwork. But not only does the human community work in unity to defeat the alien other, there is moreover no suspicion or malice between its individual members, as evidenced by the great amount of humorous banter between them. This pervasive sense of community is, in turn, reinforced by the lack of parallel editing between different characters and minimal decoupage. The frequent use of long shots mentioned above also serves to frame the characters as a group rather than as individuals. In fact, all of the film’s principal characters are shown in the same shot most of the time, working towards their goal with a single mind. Only an insignificant number of close-ups visually isolate individual characters or show them working alone, apart from the group. And because they trust each other at all times, the film’s characters are never entirely separated from each other, functioning as part of a unified, collective self. As a consequence, the only potential enemy to the human *comunitas* of the film is an external other. The alien thus always remains entirely “other”, never seeking to gain control over the humans as the Borg do, or to incorporate them as the *Alien* saga’s other does, but simply to destroy them. Ultimately, the crew may fear the alien other, but they never fear or doubt each other.

The 1982 remake of *The Thing*, by contrast, creates intense diegetic paranoia. This tone is immediately established by the opening sequence which shows a lone husky fleeing a Norwegian gunman across the vast emptiness of the Antarctic tundra. The dog, which is really a disguise, an embodiment of the alien other, is rescued by an American scientific team while the human gunman is killed, leaving no explanation for the hunt. Later, when the dog is caged along with the American husky pack, it mutates violently, attacking the other dogs and members of the expedition. Only then does it become apparent that what the American group functioning as the film’s self have taken into their isolated community is an alien other capable of adopting the form of any creature it kills, literally in-corporating them. As a consequence, for the remainder of the film the team can never be entirely certain who has already been replaced by this horrifying other whose very existence seems to defy the sanctity of the bodily self and its margins.

Despite strong parallels between Carpenter’s film and the *Alien* saga, *The Thing* (1982) sits uneasily alongside other science fiction films that depend heavily on the presence of the abject in portraying the other. Ridley Scott’s virtually indestructible alien, for instance, literally bursts (through John Hurt’s chest) onto cinema screens, turning human beings into expendable objects, mere links in the food chain or hosts along the creature’s parasitic life cycle. Yet, in terms of both visual effects and abjection, this alien other’s capacity for the
spectacular kill is dwarfed by Carpenter’s outrageous shape-shifting other, this unidentifiable “thing” sprouting tentacles, serpentine heads, razor-sharp teeth, and other amorphous extensions from what would seem to be normal (human) bodies. This is an other that appears in the guise of the self only to horrify the more by suddenly revealing a body that transgresses all margins, mutating, growing, and extending itself beyond the borders of the acceptable into the realm of the abject.

But the intense presence of the abject is only one of the aspects that distinguish Carpenter’s film from Hawks’ version. Equally significantly, its characters are not portrayed as a unified group similar to Captain Hendry’s team in The Thing From Another World. Instead, they are a group of irritable men who, at best, manage to coexist with much bickering, and, at worst, fear and distrust each other intensely. Furthermore, the alien they encounter is not an easily comprehensible “other”, but an elusive, mysterious organism which colonizes human bodies and creates duplicates of those bodies that are indistinguishable from the real self without close medical examination. The human crew does not possess any scientific means of controlling this creature, and destroying the other ultimately requires that the crew be exterminated as well. The desperate plan devised by MacReady is all but suicidal, and allows for no victory like the one achieved by the protagonists of the 1951 film. To make matters worse, the crew is also portrayed as completely isolated in Carpenter’s film. Not only are they stationed in Antarctica, completely separated from their home continent, but their aircraft and radio equipment are quickly destroyed at the beginning of the film. Their closest Antarctic neighbors, the group living at the Norwegian station, have apparently all been killed, and any rescue team cannot be expected for months, leaving the men completely reliant upon their own resources.

This oppressive sense of isolation is further heightened by the film’s mise en scène. Unlike Hawks, Carpenter allows his film to be dominated by dark, obscuring locations which appear hostile even to the humans they were designed for. The station’s corridors are dimly lit and filled with crates and barrels. The generator room is completely coated with ice, and the crew’s personal quarters are cramped and restrictive. Even the cleanest rooms in the camp are inhospitable: both kitchen and medical rooms, though pristine and shiny, are metallic and mechanical, rather than comfortable and welcoming. In terms of photography, characters are often shot in close-up, frequently with objects further obscuring their faces. Correspondingly, the film reveals its space through much decoupage, presenting rooms in a series of claustrophobic medium close-ups and close-ups. This use of photography and editing also
serves to isolate each of the men, presenting them not as members of a unified group, but as individuals concerned with their own survival.

Ultimately, the crew’s internal dividedness and individuality finds its most paranoid articulation in their struggle against the alien other. Because the creature does not appear as “other”, but assumes the form of human crew members, detecting its presence in crew members becomes almost impossible. On the level of appearances, then, the film enacts a form of *homo homini lupus* as everyone suspects and distrusts everyone else. Consequently, allegiances and temporary alliances change continually as various members are accused of harboring the other within their self, of having become other. Even after a blood test has scientifically determined which crew members are still human, trust cannot be completely restored, and the film accordingly moves towards the mutual destruction of self and other.

**Contexts**

As has been argued above, the cinematic techniques deployed by Hawks in 1951 emphasize the unity of the human community, rather than the forms of the abject usually encountered in later science fiction films. Of course, this absence of the abject also needs to be related to factors such as the technological development of the special effects sector (a point corroborated by the spectacular effects of the 1982 film), but cannot be explained solely by the film’s technical conditions of possibility. In fact, many of the techniques employed in 1982 were already available in 1951 – especially in terms of camera and editing techniques – but Hawks consciously worked to keep diegetic paranoia at a minimum. What is more, the first film version avoids visualizing the abject and its disruptive qualities because it is orchestrated to consolidate U.S. society’s sense of self and assuage its fears of the other. Hawks’ mise en scène can hardly be considered coincidental; rather, it is an effect of the socio-cultural context of the 1950s. By pitting the crew against a clearly recognizable and external other, the film re-articulated the situation in which U.S. society perceived itself to be in regarding the Soviet Union.

On another level, textual traces found in *The Thing From Another World* rather obviously link the film to the socio-cultural concerns that shaped so many science fiction films of the 1950s: uncontrollable atomic power, communism, and/or unrestrained (male or female) sexuality. Thus, in Hawks’ film, the alien and its craft both register strongly on the Geiger counter and there is speculation that the alien aircraft may in fact be a Russian ship. Less obviously, but still noticeably, the alien other’s seemingly magical escape from the ice in which it is locked occurs immediately after Pat and Nikki share a playfully romantic
interlude, as if the inappropriate heat of their bodies had thawed the imprisoned and repressed other and brought it back to life.

Carpenter’s *The Thing*, by contrast, articulates the alien other as the threat of a virus-like infection. It spreads through the self of the human community through physical contact and can only be recognized by blood tests. Because of its intense diegetic paranoia and fear of physical contact, Carpenter’s film seems to mirror the spread of the fear about the AIDS syndrome as much as its alien other embodies the HIV virus itself. And since the self of the film is embodied as an exclusively male community living in isolation, the fear evoked by the physical presence of the alien other also conveys connotations of homosexuals as potential carriers of the virus. In the film, as in the views held by U.S. society even long after GRID (Gay Related Immunity Deficiency) was renamed AIDS, the virus can be spread in the community only by this particular other, the homosexual male. Significantly, the knowledge that the virus spreads through physical contact—meaning that, as in *Alien 3*, the only way to detect alien infection is a blood test—translates into panic in the face of a potential carrier, who is immediately associated with the other. In fact, *The Thing* puts into operation an equation that is not at all peculiar to science fiction: by being infected, the self becomes identified with the threat of infection and, by extension, with the virus itself. The alien other thus comes to stand in for the (potentially) HIV-infected homosexual through a series of displacements and equations.

In the form of what Dennis Allen has described as film’s “purely visual anxiety about homosexuality” (Allen 1995: 624), the paranoia that pervades *The Thing* feeds on issues of seeing and telling the difference between self and other, between the (implicitly heterosexual) healthy self and the (implicitly homosexual) infected other. This paranoia of seeing and telling is ultimately based on the anxiety of the (male) self’s own latent homosexual desire and the subconscious need for an unmistakable sign of homosexuality that marks the other. This emphasis on visual recognition is furthermore an example of what Lee Edelman has called “homographesis”, i.e. the heterosexual fantasy of the inevitable visibility of homosexuality that serves, finally, to assert the radical distinctiveness of the heterosexual and the homosexual (cf. Edelman 1994: 9-14). On a strictly textual level, one can observe that the alien in Carpenter’s film is not unleashed after scenes of heterosexual love, as in the original movie, but amidst a group of males associating closely with one another.

6. Conclusion: Into the Heart of Darkness
Remarkably, the endings of *First Contact* and *Aliens* run parallel in terms of their narrative structure and closure. In both films, the protagonist is given the opportunity to escape in safety while also being certain of the alien other’s complete destruction, but chooses to remain behind because he knows a friend to be still in the hands (or tentacles, as it were) of the other. In fact, the protagonist must prove his or her humanity by venturing right into the dragon’s lair to save this friend, and in the process must also face the queen of the other. The figure of the queen is not simply an embodiment of the other, but encompasses that the threat of the other (even though its manifestations may be large numbers) in its entirety. Her destruction, in other words, ensures the final repression of the other, just as the defeat of Picard or Ripley would equal the defeat of the collective human self. To confirm this reading, one need only turn to the official press release for the most recent *Star Trek* film, entitled *Nemesis*, which states that its villain “sets out to destroy Picard and the Federation, precisely in that order”. The hierarchical nature of the *Star Trek* universe and its tradition of symbolic deferrals (with the captain standing for the crew, the crew for the Enterprise, and the ship, in turn, for the entire “United Federation of Planets”) lends itself perfectly to personified and embodied struggles of this kind – the implication being, of course, that with the defeat of its “purest” embodiment (read that white, male, upper class, heterosexual) human society itself will fall.

Entering the domain of the other and the heart of its power, the protagonist in both *Aliens* and *First Contact* passes from territory associated with the bodily self (the human-built colony and the starship Enterprise) into territory that has changed, has been assimilated by the other, as if the very notion of space needed to be complemented with a spatial other as well. In the case of *Aliens*, this is realized visually by means of organic “secretions” left behind by the alien creatures, wall- or hive-like structures of smooth, black, and slimy appearance, closely resembling the body of the alien itself. It looks and feels almost as though Ripley had entered the very body of the alien other. Immediately preceding the moment of narrative closure, this is the point of ultimate danger and final crises for the self. For Picard in *First Contact*, the entrance into the realm of the other is visualized through the technologically assimilated surroundings of the Enterprise, itself an embodiment of the self of the crew as a whole. The change of the surrounding corridors is thus already a violation of the self, much more so in *First Contact* than in *Aliens*, because of the long history connecting the ship and its crew. Still, both Ripley and Picard ultimately have to face and the defeat the queen of their respective alien other in order to rescue the captive Newt and Data, respectively. Significantly, these victims are in acute danger of being incorporated: that is to say, Newt into
the life cycle of the alien, and Data into the Borg collective by being given real flesh. In both
cases, this takes the form of violations of the bodily margins of the self: a forced birth
(equaling death) in the case of Newt and the transgression of the boundary between human
(organic) and machine in the case of Data. The protagonist’s final struggle to save the
victim’s life is thus also a struggle to preserve and safeguard the sanctity of these boundaries
(or else to re-establish them, in the case of Data, whose false flesh is literally burned away by
plasma coolant, purging him of any sign of a transgression). This process of purification finds
its corresponding element in the purging of the larger body of the self, whether colony or
starship: by means of a nuclear explosion in the case of the former and the ship’s
reconstruction in case of the latter.

These are perhaps two of the more affirmative endings of the films referred to in this
study. They do not contain the self-negating momentum of The Thing or the insidious
paranoia of Invasion of the Bodysnatchers. Instead, First Contact and Aliens emphasize
individual agency (or heroism) by allowing the respective protagonists to defeat not only the
alien other but also the rules of the genre. By daringly rescuing someone who, in the “normal”
course of events and by the protagonist’s own judgment, would have to be considered already
doomed. Both films furthermore articulate a hope for the reestablishment of clear-cut
boundaries (both visible and clean) between self and other, boundaries which they articulate
as bodily margins threatened by a (bodily) other. These are moreover boundaries which can
only be re-established by disposing of (or exposing) those who have already become
contaminated (infected, impregnated, or assimilated) by the other. Killing off those “other”
parts of the self is articulated as a necessary act of self-defense in the form of self-purification
or self-mutilation. Hence the Borg Queen’s taunts to Data, referring to the new flesh she has
given him: “tear the skin from your limb as you would a defective circuit”. Policing the
abject, in particular the field of bodily margins thus seems to be the most significant
psychological labor of mainstream science fiction film. In fact, notions of territory and every
kind of spatial reference (visual or verbal, metaphorical or actual) to the marking or
maintaining of boundaries are crucial to the psychological and perhaps ideological work done
by these films as their characters engage in and speak about walking perimeters, standing
their ground, making a last stand, holding their position, or drawing the line. Picard’s words
in First Contact are perhaps the most powerful and evocative echo of this general tendency:
“They invade our space, and we fall back. They assimilate entire worlds, and we fall back.
The line must be drawn here. This far and no farther!” In a sense, then, these films are rally
calls to stand the ground against the other, to police the self and make no concessions to
otherness, but they are also fantasies about a binary world in which such a clear-cut distinction can ultimately be achieved.

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1 The lists Bakhtin gives of “apertures [...] and offshoots” (Bakhtin 1984b: 26), and ways in which the body exceeds its own limits, cite together male and female attributes and activities. Some critics have suggested that this makes the grotesque an androgynous or gender-free realm in a positive way (cf. Stamm 1989: 159-163; Jefferson 1989: 166), or else that his (metaphorical) appropriation of female bodily functions writes actual women out of the picture. It is in this respect that Ginsburg argues that Bakhtin “failed to incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic” (cf. Ginsburg 1993: 169).

2 Laura Mulvey has pointed that it is carnival’s tripartite structure – “from everyday norm to the license of disorder and back again” – which makes it integrative and arguably conservative, “providing a social safety-valve for the forces of disorder” (Mulvey 1996: 169).

3 The most readily available image of how carnival “digs a bodily grave for new life” may be Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais’ description of Gargantua’s death and simultaneous delivery. In that passage, “the bodies [of human and animal, as well as the categorical distinction between the two] are interwoven and begin to be fused in one grotesque image of a devoured and devouring world” (Bakhtin 1984b: 206). For a closer reading, see the discussion of the maternal below; see also Vice (1997).

4 See Vice (1997) for a detailed account of the problematic position of gender in Bakhtin’s work.

5 The term is often seen misleading, as it does in part derive from the classical Greek and Roman visions of the body as accessible in sculpture, but is not closely modeled on any comprehensive analysis of classical conceptions of the body as an object of philosophy.

6 Heated theoretical battles are still being fought over Bakhtin’s ideological position and his role as either victim or clever manipulator of the communist system. See Vice (1997) for more on his ambiguous stance in relation to the party and its teachings.

7 As Ruth Ginsburg puts it, Bakhtin thus follows Rabelais in seeing “the old as the mother and the new as the son” (Ginsburg 1993: 173). Needless to say, it is the old that must inevitably die to make way for the new.

8 The only notable exceptions, of course, are technological innovation, especially in the special effects and CGI sectors of the film industry.

9 There has also been a conscious effort to portray America’s European heritage by including, in both the original series and its follow-up, Star Trek: The Next Generation, an Irishman or a Scotsman as engineer.

10 It should furthermore be noted that Worf’s otherness as an alien was emphasized by means of additional prosthetics so that his skin color would not be seen as a connection to African Americans, thus disavowing any relation between Star Trek’s diegetic other and U.S. society’s non-diegetic other. This radical change in the physical appearance of the Klingon race created severe internal inconsistencies for the Star Trek “universe”. These were never satisfactorily explained on the show, even though the characters acknowledged the change when, at one point, Worf was asked about the change in his people’s physical appearance. His answer, however, was simply that he would prefer not to talk about it. While the dialogue in question implies a diegetic reason for the change, knowable by the characters, this version is disproven by the latest spin-off series in the Star Trek franchise, Enterprise, which is set before the timeline of the original series, but nevertheless features Klingons that look exactly as in the later shows.

11 On a different level, the Borg ship seems to function as a maternal body for the Borg. Whenever they go into a state of hibernation in order to regenerate, the Borg interface with their ship and connect to this larger body as if in utero.

12 Star Trek: Voyager, another spin-off series has continued the Star Trek tradition of assimilation by incorporating even the Borg into the crew of the starship Voyager. Obviously, to incorporate, as it were, the personalized tendency to incorporate leads this tradition ad absurdum.

13 See also Kavanagh (1980: 98) for the construction of a similar semiotic square for Ridley Scott’s Alien.

14 When, in fact, Data confronts the Borg Queen with the logical conclusion that her existence is a contradiction, she responds coldly: “You are in chaos Data. You are the contradiction: a machine who wishes to be human”. Of course, they are both, in a way, right about each other.

15 Remarkably, Seven-of-Nine, the Borg character who appeared on Star Trek: Voyager after the commercial success of the eight feature film, is also female and highly sexualized in both her appearance and movements. With her, however, any sexuality that goes beyond the voyeuristic pleasures of looking is turned into an inviolable taboo that several episodes and sub-plots serve to construct.

16 There are strong fetishistic (in the non psychoanalytical sense of the word) overtones to the alien’s physical appearance. Apart from the fact that what the alien creature’s exoskeleton is really made of latex, consider the alien’s fetishistic behavior in Alien: It displays. It doesn’t go for the quick kill, so to speak; rather, it delays and
lingers, literally posing for the audience and its victims, showing off its beauty, its smooth surfaces, phallic
tongue, and lubricated slickness.

xvii In the guise of the alien queen, the alien is also a mother and apparently female. In fact, the marketing
campaign for Alien 3 included the pitch slogan “The bitch is back”, accompanied by a shot that showed both
Ripley and the alien in the same frame.

xviii The alien other that enters the body of the self and assumes control over it, it should be noted, was certainly
not invented by science fiction in the 1980s. Forbidden Planet (1956) and the original Invasion of the Body
Snatchers (1956) are just two examples of 1950s science fiction films which showed the other as some form of
“internal” threat, as did the various retellings of the Jekyll and Hyde story in horror films throughout the last
century.

xix The alien other can, of course, be articulated as an embodiment of uncontrolled, unconsenting, procreative
sexuality. Referring to the scene in which the character played by John Hurt dies as he gives birth to the alien
other, Amy Taubin wrote that “[g]ranted that the terror of being raped and devoured by the monster loomed large
for both sexes, Alien was basically a male anxiety fantasy: that a man could be impregnated was the ultimate
outrage” (Taubin 1993: 86).

xx The science fiction parody Spaceballs (1987) has exploited and parodied this association of food with the alien
other bursting from the victim’s chest. And while this moment is one of Kristevan abjection in Alien, the
anarchic humor of Mel Brooks’ comedy turns it into something much closer to the Bakhtinian notion of carnival.

xxi The so called “Company” is discovered to have an agenda of its own: it plans to preserve the alien creature for
commercial reasons and is thus inhuman precisely in that it works against the human protagonists’ attempts to
defeat the other.
References


