

This book is dedicated to my grandmothers, Lorraine Nancy Nuzzo DiGioia, and Winifred Bridget Gallagher Cresman, for their unconditional love; to Dr Aura Zahan, who ordered the scan that saved my life; and to the women who are my friends. Thank you for supporting me.

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One can [di]verge from the standard form, but one must always retain their humanity, or be lost to the Men of Iron and their ways. *Text of the Oiled Cog*, v.12

Kasedo Games, 2018, *Warhammer 40,000: Mechanicus*.

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Preface

I sat, numb, in the oncologist's office. I had just been told there were several masses in my chest, and that the medical team was not quite sure what they were. The masses, apparently, were very weird. My mind immediately went to pop culture. "Are you sure it isn't a xenomorph?" I asked. "No," the doctor replied. "This is not *Prometheus III*". That was the moment at which the idea for this volume hatched in my mind.

This book is a comparative, gendered analysis study of Ridley Scott's contributions to the genre of science fiction cinema. This book will also tie into my previous research (and previous Emerald publication) *Childbirth and Parenting in Horror Texts: The Marginalized and the Monstrous*. This previous book focused on motherhood, an issue that impacts all women who live under patriarchy. Many of the texts that I am studying are new, so this book will add to the literature on Scott, sci-fi and feminism. My fields of women's studies and gender studies have established that, for women, and other marginalized groups, the personal is political: personal experiences are the result of social structures or inequality (Hanisch, 2006), allowing me to use personal accounts outside a solely autoethnographic context.

The book will focus on imagined communities, the objectification of women (both real and 'androids' or holograms), as well as depictions of birth, motherhood, and fatherhood in recent Ridley Scott science fiction/horror texts, building upon the previous monograph mentioned above. I am fortunate enough to be friends with a special effects artist who worked on *Prometheus*, who has given me permission to publish their insights anonymously. I will include conversations with this artist in this book, as many of the aliens in *Prometheus* have been crafted to resemble variations on the vagina dentata, a topic of academic research to which I dedicated an entire chapter of *Childbirth and Parenting in Horror Text*. In lieu of a strictly psychoanalytic approach (as anything based on Freud is built on quicksand), I instead

argue that the *vagina dentata* is an evolutionary fear that has been learned, due to the prevalence of the notion of the *vagina dentata* in societies around the globe (Rees, 2015).

The first chapter, 'Gender, Childbirth, and Parenting in Science Fiction Films and Gender in Horror Films', provides the necessary theoretical framework and background for the book. I define the *Blade Runner* films as science fiction works with elements of horror (from the corporeal to the existential), and the *Alien* universe as a collection of horror texts. This is because, at their core, the films, video games, novels, and various other ephemera that make up the *Alien* universe all feature discovery, confirmation, confrontation and a supernatural dread of the unknown. While science fiction elements are certainly present within this universe, horror is not limited to the supernatural: it can also be biological, as the alien is in this universe. 'Science fiction' as a term is, like some science fiction characters themselves, nebulous, but can generally be used to describe fiction that features extrapolated science or fictitious use of scientific possibilities (Sobchack, 2001), all of which feature in the *Blade Runner* universe. This chapter will describe previous work on gender, childbirth, and parenting in horror and in science fiction (Clark, 2011; Corea, 2007; Creed, 1993; Ewing & Decker, 2017; Freeland, 2000; George, 2013; Grant, 2015; Noonan, 2015; Picart, 2004), which I will then link to *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant* in later chapters.

The second chapter, 'More Human Than Human: *Blade Runner 2049*', focuses on feminist analysis of gender and sex in *Blade Runner 2049*. I argue that gender, like humanity in *Blade Runner 2049*, is nothing but a social construct. Additionally, I suggest that *Blade Runner 2049* is one in a long succession of science fiction films that reinforce patriarchal myths about gender and power (Hobby, 2000). *Blade Runner* arguably bleeds over into the cyberpunk realm as well (Holland, 1995; Landsberg, 1995). Because so many female replicants in both the original *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049* are male playthings of various sorts, I will also use feminist research on the current use, and future production of,

female sex robots to frame my argument (Mackenzie, 2018; Richardson, 2015). Finally, I make use of theories about feminism and tech, beginning with Haraway (1984) before moving on to more contemporary sources (Berg, 2019; Harari, 2016).

The third chapter, ‘We were so wrong’: the perversion of male creation. Motherhood, fatherhood and birth in *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*’ focuses on *Alien*, *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*. I show how the female hero in each of these texts has shifted from a place of (near) gender equality (such as in *Alien*) to one where women lack agency and are dismembered or slaughtered nude, solely to satisfy the male gaze. This chapter will include a visual effect creator’s insight into why the extra-terrestrial life forms discovered by the crew in *Prometheus* often look vaginal, drawing upon my previous work on the vagina dentata and why men fear them, and the work of feminist scholars of horror (Creed, 1993; Freeland, 2000). This chapter also suggests an update to Jordanova’s (1989) theory of mad scientist ‘bad dads’.

The fourth chapter, ‘‘You’ve never seen a miracle’: Birth in *Blade Runner 2049*’ focuses on birth in *Blade Runner 2049*, which revolves around events stemming from a synthetic replicant giving birth. This birth is viewed as either monstrous (“She was a replicant. Pregnant. This breaks the world, K. Do you know what that means?” (Villeneuve, 2017)) or miraculous (“You newer models are happy scraping the shit... because you’ve never seen a miracle” (Villeneuve, 2017)) in the film universe. Those involved with law and order in this future society view the birth of a human from a replicant as an abomination that needs to be concealed, whereas those who are on the fringes of society, or subjugated by those in power, view it as miraculous. Notably, the individual with the most power and privilege within *Blade Runner 2049*, Niander Wallace, is a ‘bad dad’ mad scientist, who perversely uses birth as a means to attain his own goals, which are 1) to prove his supremacy over Tyrell (as Tyrell’s replicants reproduce naturally, and Wallace’s cannot); 2) to use reproduction in

replicants to support interstellar colonisation;¹ and 3) profit. This chapter will briefly touch upon scientific research into artificial wombs (Bulletti et al., 2011; Gelfand & Shook, 2006; Simonstein, 2006), before utilising academic work on robo-ethics (Siciliano and Khatib, 2016; Veruggio, Operto & Bekey, 2016), and on robots bearing and raising children (Andries et al., 2018; Batliner et al., 2004; Beran et al., 2011; Robins et al., 2005). The final chapter reflects upon how, in Scott's future, the outlook for women is bleak. I will then ruminate on how this reflects our current patriarchal society.

The fifth and final chapter, "I can't lie to you about your chances, but... you have my sympathies", is an autoethnography, used to explore my own experiences of cancer, infertility, gender-based medical treatment. Here, I connect my real-world experiences with the fictional world *Alien*. I found reading the experiences of other individuals who had undergone cancer treatment to be extremely beneficial. I hope that this chapter assists others, as reading the testaments of Lorde (1980) and Miller (2014) eased my own burdens and pain.

During the writing of this volume, COVID-19 spread across the world. Because I am extremely clinically vulnerable and COVID shielded due to my recent blood cancer diagnoses and chronic cardiac issues from chemotherapy treatment, I have been isolated from society at large. I could not fly home for my grandmother's funeral. The government where I live (the United Kingdom) and a government where I hold citizenship (the United States) proved time and time again that capital was more important than human life. While I am postulating theories as to what happens in these futuristic fictional worlds, in some ways, we are already living in them.

¹ "That barren pasture. Empty, and salted. The dead space between the stars. Right here. And this is the seed that we must change for Heaven. I cannot breed them. So help me, I have tried. We need more Replicants than can ever be assembled. Millions, so we can be trillions more. We could storm Eden and retake her." (Villeneuve, 2017).

Chapter 1. Gender, Childbirth, and Parenting in Science Fiction Films and Gender in Horror Films

Ridley Scott's science fiction classics *Blade Runner* and *Alien* are each set in the near future or the immediate past (*Blade Runner* is set in November 2019), in which space travel and off-earth colonies are commonplace. Each of these works also features a future world in which patriarchal and gendered expectations regarding women run rampant. I argue that in the case of the *Alien* franchise, Scott has shifted from focusing on the future, and what humanity may be able to obtain from it, to a focus on facing mortality: what occurs after death and the futility of human existence (themes touched upon in his earlier work, but which occur more frequently and more evidently in the latest incarnations of the *Alien* universe, perhaps in part because Scott is now 81 years old). I argue that Scott has applied antiquated (sometimes Biblical) gender roles to his work. A very basic analysis of *Blade Runner 2049* would be that the future as presented is still dominated by patriarchy and technology. I suggest something more complex: instead of showing us a world that has collapsed under the weight of patriarchy and late capitalism, *Blade Runner 2049* is an example of evolutionary horror, a genre that pushes Darwin's theory of an ever-changing natural world to terrifying extremes by utilising images of women's bodies to 'map the fragmentation and reconfiguration of dominant knowledge and identity paradigms' (Dumas, 2018, p. 24). As Dumas notes:

Many works in this vein position the maternal body [...] as a site of metamorphic power and reproductive anxiety, invoking female biological processes² such as menstruation, gestation, and birth to connote the possibility that the fixed and familiar might at any point give way to fluidity and forgiveness. (Dumas, 2018, p. 24)

A fine example of this occurs in *Blade Runner 2049*: the possibility that a female replicant has 'evolved' sufficiently to give birth shakes societal foundations to their core, causing the

² The author would like to note that some women do not have ovaries, vaginas, or uteruses, and that some women have penises. Biology is not destiny, and the various sex organs absolutely do not determine whether someone is a woman or not.

Los Angeles Police Department to focus all of their energy on covering up what they deem to be an abomination by eliminating the now-adult child. We return to this idea (i.e. the suggestion that women who can give birth are more evolved or ‘better’ than women who can’t), in Chapter 5. Others in the replicant population band together to protect what they call a “miracle” (Villeneuve, 2017).

The future for human women and replicants gendered as women is bleak in the world of *Blade Runner*. Many of the female androids are created (and used solely) for the amusement of men: Rachael by her creator to see if an android can be ‘tricked’ into becoming human; Pris for sexual fulfilment (she is “your basic pleasure model” with a lower level of intelligence); and Zhora for exotic dancing. In *Blade Runner*, female androids and machines are either disempowered sex workers or mindless objects onto which men can more easily project their desires. *Blade Runner 2049* does not improve matters: while other options are explored in *Blade Runner* for women or replicants gendered as women (e.g. Joi and Mariette), *Blade Runner 2049* shows women categorized into a series of clichés recognizable in our own time: villainous, cold and uncharismatic protagonists; xenophobic workaholics murdered at their desks (Lt. Joshi); replicant mothers who die from complications related to giving birth (Rachael); or finally objects, validated by their ability (or lack thereof) to reproduce or otherwise please men. As Gibson notes, all of the replicant women in *Blade Runner 2049* are, in one way or another, akin to slaves (Gibson, 2020). This book will build upon feminist critiques (Doyle, 2019; Levy, 2009; Richardson, 2015) to explore gendered aspects of sexuality and reproduction as expressed in *Blade Runner*.

While *Alien*, and *Aliens* (and to some extension, *Alien 3* and *Alien: Resurrection*) showed women as competent space travellers who could be their own heroes (Reardon, 2019), in *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*, women are once again relegated to the status of objects that (android) men can torture, and whose suffering is displayed for audiences to

gawk at. Thus, it can be argued that Scott has undermined his previous work and its considerable impact on depictions of gender in the science-fiction genre. *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant* also rely on tropes surrounding motherhood and its importance to women in patriarchal society: women are fulfilled only by being mothers, and becoming a mother is depicted as the ultimate goal of women, even in the year 2089.

As I argued in my monograph on Russian duelling and toxic masculinity (2020, p. 170), science fiction texts often come loaded with gendered expectations.

For instance, science fiction traditionally caters to a male potential audience/reader (Scodari, 2003, p. 118) and tends to preserve heteronormative hegemony. This is something of a paradox, as science fiction prides itself on being a 'literature of cognitive estrangement'. Regardless of the efforts of feminist writers and creators to 're-think the problematics of the gender' (particularly gender's impact on the lives of women), 'heterosexuality as an institutionalized nexus of human activity remains stubbornly resistant to defamiliarization' (Hollinger, 1999, p. 24). While some scholars point to the positives that the science fiction genre brings to both society and scholarship, such as 'new ways of talking [about] gender' (Attebury, 2002, p. 16), others claim that the participation of women within the science fiction genre as creators, characters, and fans, 'has become a feminist issue. The mere fact of their presence created a tradition that other women could then become a part of' (Larbalestier, 2002, pp. 2-3). That said, there is evidence that even science fiction authors who identify as women often repeat generic conventions regarding sex and gender, although they may repeat these conventions differently (Donawerth, 1996). While some texts challenge gender norms (*Lizard Radio* ((Schmatz, 2015)), *Walk to the End of the World* ((Charnas, 1974)) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* ((Guin, 1969)) are some examples) on the whole, the genre does not often champion modification and transformation in futuristic worlds.

Rather, many science fiction texts accept gender roles and divides without question, thus supporting and reproducing the familiar heteronormativity and patriarchy of our current reality onto fictional, futuristic worlds. Why? It might be a conscious choice, in that the familiarity of those tropes is recognizable to audiences and thus helps them to identify with the characters (Csicsery-Ronay, 2012; Majsova, 2021); or it might be a form of ally-ship, with the writers and film-makers attempting to reproduce patriarchy as a way of showing that they understand how powerful and destructive it is (Wolmark, 1994); or it might be entirely

unconscious, flowing naturally from the inherent patriarchal world in which these films are conceived and watched.

The term 'patriarchy' is frequently used in this book, derived from Greek and meaning the 'rule of the father' (Strauss, 2012, p. 16). In the context of gender studies, 'patriarchy' refers to the global social system that upholds power held by predominately white, cis-men. While patriarchy is everywhere (Millet, 1970), it is also complex and densely layered, and hence the same applies to the various forms of subjugation that it leads to. Thus, as the notion of intersectionality makes clear, a woman of colour experiences patriarchy differently than a white woman (Crenshaw, 1989); a trans-woman experiences patriarchy differently than a cis-woman. Reflecting the ethnicity of the characters presented in Scott's films, I will be speaking mainly of the experiences of white Western cis-women under patriarchy.

The terms 'mother' and 'father' need to be defined. Patriarchal societal norms indicate that a mother is an individual who physically carries and gives birth to a child, and then takes the lead in nurturing and providing corporeal comfort to that child. This process begins with gestation and/or childbirth, and refers to a role traditionally assigned to a woman. The father is then the secondary, 'supporting' parent, and is a man. Of course, these norms do not recognize the fact that many fathers and mothers have no biological connection to their children; not every child has two parents; not every family exists on the gender binary; not every family consists of heterosexual parents; parental roles can be filled by various household members; and all parents provide some nurturing and support. For the sake of brevity, I will plug into heteronormativity and use the terms 'mother' and 'father' to refer to the roles typically filled by a woman and a man, but this should not be interpreted as a judgment on values. The terms 'mother' and 'father' will also refer to spiritual or social mothers and fathers, as opposed to strictly biological relationships.

Additionally, including fathers as described in this book (many of whom, but not all, identify as men) needs justification. Antifeminist and antifemale backlash, in the guise of sympathy for men or boys, sometimes arises from masculinist studies of fatherhood (Dragiewicz, 2008, p. 121). Understanding that, fathers remain understudied compared to mothers (which in turn is a reflection on the societal norm that mothers care for their children, while fathers do not (Dowd, 2010, p. 22)). While research on fathers has demonstrated their ability to care and their important role in the nurturing of children, the construction of masculinity hurts and undermines fathers' parenting (Levant & Richmond, 2016, p. 23). In fact, the true horror of these films lies in the 'concerns about masculinity, its powers, expectations, and limitations, all of which are heightened by the experience of fatherhood' (Freeland, 2000, p. 239). As I mention in my first book (DiGioia, 2017), in general, fathers are painted with more sympathy than mothers in horror texts and they are often represented as having the best intentions before they pave the road to hell. This can be said about *Prometheus*, *Alien: Covenant*, *Blade Runner*, and *Alien: Isolation*: every father featured here had a noble intention, whether it was the masculine-presenting Engineer (to create worlds), Peter Weyland (to defeat death) or David/Tyrell (to create the perfect lifeform). This stands in opposition to the mothers featured in *Prometheus*, *Alien: Covenant*, *Blade Runner 2049*, and *Alien: Isolation*: they are either extra-terrestrial killing machines (e.g. the alien protomorphs and neomorphs, the two stages of the Alien prior to the well-known xenomorph)³ or vassals to be tortured and experimented on by men, before their prayers for fertility are perversely, and lethally, answered (as in the case of Dr. Elizabeth Shaw).

In stark contrast to fatherhood, motherhood and reproduction have been at the centre of feminist discourse about women's rights ever since its inception (Kawash, 2011, p. 93).

³ Protomorphs, neomorphs, and xenomorphs are different, but similar, deadly versions of endoparasitoid extra-terrestrial. Protomorphs and neomorphs are considered to be primordial variants of the xenomorph.

Men throughout history, from Aristotle to Freud to Mike Pence, have contended that women are ‘freakish creatures capable of immense destruction’ (Doyle, 2019). Discourse on reproduction and motherhood has varied. For the first and second waves of feminist movements, such discourse focused on the right to abortion as well as the public recognition of motherhood as important and exhausting labour (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 163). In the last few decades of the twentieth century, assisted reproductive technologies started new conversations and new feminist dialogues surrounding motherhood (Goodwin, 2005, p. 1). However, although assisted reproductive technologies have helped many women (with the necessary means and youth) to achieve parenthood, discourses around childbirth have remained relatively static, and are connected with prevailing beliefs surrounding women’s inherent, ‘natural’ characteristics. In fact, even today, ‘cultural femininity and biological reproduction are curiously synonymous in the proclamations of medical science about women’ (Oakley, 1981, p. 50). Essentially, the feminist contribution to the understanding of motherhood as a structuring category has been its insistence on a distinction between biological and social motherhood (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 165). I will address both in the context of the Scott film universe.

Motherhood is sacred to patriarchal Western female identity. Simone de Beauvoir once claimed that many women ‘are made to see motherhood as the essence of their life and the fulfilment of their destiny’ (de Beauvoir, 1953, p. 484), which marginalizes women as little more than wombs, and men as little more than breadwinners. Motherhood continues to define adult femininity in one way or another in the West, and those who remain childless are often relegated to the derogatory category of ‘spinsters’, stereotyped as lonely, shrivelled women with empty lives, or, conversely, ‘career woman’ (Eckes, 2002, p. 99), viewed as non-nurturing or cold (Chick et al., 2002, p. 149). The pervasive notion that childbearing is a natural and essential aspect of the female existence pressurises couples consisting of men and

women,⁴ and studies have consistently shown that women feel more stress about infertility than men,⁵ mainly because in most cultures, infertility is regarded as a woman failing to fulfill her prescribed gender role (Luk & Yuen Loke, 2014, p. 610).

For example, women undergoing cancer treatment, or women who are cancer survivors in the US report reproductive potential as ‘essential to quality of life’, and concerns about fertility may impact women’s treatment decisions (Deshpande, Braun & Meye, 2015, p. 3938). Studies have demonstrated that up to 75% of women aged 18 to 45 years with a recent cancer diagnosis are interested in whether their treatment will impact their ability to bear children (Deshpande, Braun, & Meye, 2015, p. 3938). In another mixed-gender survey of young German cancer survivors, more than half stated that having a child was ‘most important’ in their life and 62% were ‘most concerned’ with the impact the cancer treatment would have on their fertility (Geue et al., 2014). Variance analysis indicates that female cancer survivors had greater psychological distress associated with infertility than male cancer survivors (Seitz et al., 2010). Other female cancer patients and survivors reported that the potential loss of fertility may be almost as painful, if not more so, than confronting the malignant, life-threatening disease itself (Trèves, Grynberg, Parco & Finet, 2014). This pain lingers even if the patient has gone into remission: even a decade after treatment, female cancer survivors whose wish for children remains unfulfilled reported distress about cancer-related infertility (Canada & Schover, 2012). This data also indicates that the psychological distress of these women may have actually increased over time, particularly if they have had failed fertility treatments (Geue et al., 2014). Thus, women in the West undergoing very difficult treatment for a life-changing illness are still preoccupied with their fertility. While I do not have space to unpack this here in its totality (I will certainly do so later in the book),

⁴ I do not say ‘heterosexual’, as sexuality is fluid, and couple that appears to be heterosexual may in fact not be: the man or woman within the coupling may identify as bisexual or queer, for example.

⁵ Of course, other genders can be infertile as well, but many infertility studies focus on genders within the dominant gender binary of men and women.

some of these women might genuinely desire a family for their own reasons, social pressures notwithstanding; however, those that only really worry about their fertility because of social pressures are not at fault, but rather are the victims of societal norms. It may be that some of these women focus on the loss of their fertility because it represents a smaller, easier loss to bear and confront than their own mortality.

Defining adult femininity via motherhood (or lack of it) is also done elsewhere in the world: for example, research on women in countries outside the West or Global North (Donkor & Sandall, 2007, p. 1683; Remennick, 2000, p. 821) indicates that infertile women are also stigmatized here. These studies emphasise that, to many women, motherhood has been presented as the ultimate source of status, and failing to fulfil that societal obligation undermines all other accomplishments. Demonization is therefore correlated to the revulsion caused by anyone (but particularly women) 'going against nature'.⁶ Other notable categories might be older mothers (e.g. those conceiving via IVF), single mothers, mothers with children who have multiple fathers, and mothers whose physical appearance differs from that of their adopted children. Furthermore, women (or replicants made to be women) in the new incarnations of *Alien* and *Blade Runner* are also contemporary examples of the use of motherhood as a site of evolutionary horror. This is shown in the *Alien* universe through Dr. Elizabeth Shaw, the main character of *Prometheus* (2012) and a plot point in *Alien: Covenant* (2016), who gives birth to an entirely new alien race both via her womb and her DNA. The same could be said of replicant Rachael in *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), who births something that society previously thought was impossible: a living child. The trope of the child in horror is well-known, and is nearly as prominent as motherhood tropes within the genre: I spoke

⁶ It should be noted that not all motherhood is valued in Western patriarchal society: mothers who are also people of colour, or mothers who are also working class, are demonized by those with privilege. See Gilliam (1999) and Ladd-Taylor (2004). Additionally, teenage or single mothers are often assumed to be feckless and stupid, when in fact many studies show they do a perfectly good job of raising their children (Duncan, 2007). Although the teenage mothers often mention societal stigma leaves them feeling shame and embarrassment (Ngum Chi Watts et al., 2015), teenage fathers do not (Khatun et al., 2017).

about hideous progeny briefly in my previous Emerald monograph (DiGioia, 2017), but will expand on it later in this book. Furthermore, every Scott text mentioned so far has the additional unifying theme of the horror and perversion of male creation. Androids in both the *Alien* and *Blade Runner* universes are despised objects that human characters respond to with revulsion, horror and fear.

Obviously, any discussion of gender, motherhood and so forth has a Freudian element to it, but I propose to mention Freud in my book only for the purposes of demonstrating that I agree with Crews, as his theories have been widely debunked. Freud once wrote that ‘Women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own’ (Freud, 1925, pp. 243-258). While Freud postulated various ideas about what women truly wanted (Mothersill, 1973), it is evident that he had already made up his mind that they want to be wives and mothers (Lehmann, 2001). Freud believed that only men could acquire morality, whereas women were immoral, deceitful and manipulative without the presence of a male figure (a father or a husband) to guide them (Coffey, 2015). This led Freud into further errors, such as the notion that lesbians are fundamentally untrustworthy and unstable (Coffey, 2015). Crews argues that ‘there is literally nothing to be said, scientifically or therapeutically, to the advantage of the entire Freudian system or any of its component dogmas’ (1996, p. 67). Freud did none of his work via the scientific method (the standard for research in both psychology and psychiatry).

Hall elaborates:

He never tested his ideas with experiments that might have falsified his beliefs, and he ignored facts that contradicted his beliefs. Many of his supposed original ideas came from other authors. How did he “discover” the Oedipus complex when none of his patients ever suggested they had such a problem? The answer is in a letter he wrote to a friend saying, “I found in myself a constant love for my mother, and jealousy of my father. I now consider this to be a universal event in early childhood.” Talk about projection and confirmation bias! When tested, psychoanalysis was shown to be less effective than placebo. Its theories have been disproven, and no reasonable scientist or practitioner takes it seriously today. Yet it persists in popular opinion as one of the primary canons of practicing psychology. (Hall, 2015, n.p.)

Academics have consistently ‘whitewashed’ Freud’s errors (Dufrense, 2014), or studied him as a writer (in departments of language or literature), as opposed to as a psychologist or psychoanalyst. However, Freud was not a literary writer or a novelist, but rather a man with a prejudice against women and particularly lesbians (Coffey, 2015), practising and writing as a doctor. Defenders of Freud often repeat that ‘he was a man of his time’ (Pomeroy, 2015, n.pg), and when compared with his contemporaries, ‘Freud was indeed a compassionate, forward-thinking physician’ (Coffey, 2015, n.pg). To that, I say that man that smiles at me with his boot pressed upon my neck still has my neck in a vice: I vote that we (academics) throw the whole man (Freud), and his theories, out.

Creed’s work indicates that critics had previously ignored the feminine as monstrous in horror, instead focusing on the feminine as heroine or victim. Creed says that the xenomorphs in the *Alien* universe are an example of an ‘archaic mother’. This term refers to a Freudian (1914) claim that all children have witnessed their parents having sexual intercourse, which is something I have always thought preposterous: not all children have witnessed their parents having sexual intercourse (I know I haven’t). Upon seeing the archaic mother’s lack of phallus, the shocked child supposedly posits an ‘archaic mother’ (a powerful nourisher and seducer) with a phallus. Creed (1992) argues that the ‘archaic mother’ uses that phallus to cover up her vagina dentata. Conceptually, a vagina dentata plays on male fears of vaginas, wombs, mothers and childbirth, and has been represented in various media from ancient times. It is prevalent all over the world, with cultural examples found from Oceania to North America to Asia (Raitt, 1980, p. 416). The vagina dentata, for males, can also represent the fear of entry to the unknown, of the dark dangers that must be controlled and stamped out in women (Raitt, 1980, p. 416). Women in possession of destructive or deadly genitalia are threats that must be neutralized: the dangerous teeth must be pulled out to make her a compliant, procreative partner, or the woman must be killed (Raitt, 1980, p. 416).

Creed also says that horror films illustrate Kristeva's concept of 'abjection' (Kristeva, 1982), a vague and complex concept that can be explained in this context as a deep revulsion towards someone or something seen as disgustingly dirty, slimy, or putrid. Mothers appear horrific because of the pre-Oedipal stage of the infant's ambivalence toward the mother as it struggles to create boundaries and form its own ego identity. Thus, the mother is 'horrific' because she is seen as all-engulfing, primitive and defiled by bodily fluids, particularly breast milk and menstrual blood (Freeland, 2000, p. 18). Literally anything and everything is an archaic mother in Creed's work: Medusa, a xenomorph queen, an ominous doorway, or the (male) shark in *Jaws* (1974/1975). I do not agree with Creed's loose definition of archaic mother, which encompasses death itself while also (simultaneously and confusingly) being a terrifying female with a full womb that does not rely on the male to define her. Nor do I agree with Creed's reductionist tendencies. For Creed, all horror films say generally the same thing, and focus on horror as fear of things themselves, as opposed to fear of what things represent. Creed makes no effort to reference difference in viewership, social aspects of film-going, or marketing (Creed, 1993, pp. 16-30). I also think that some things are simply 'scary' in their own right, rather than because of what they may represent. For instance, the shark in *Jaws* is undeniably frightening, regardless of whether we think of it as an archaic mother or as a massive man-eating shark.⁷ I instead argue that the fear of the menstruating women, the birthing woman, and the power of the mother goes back much farther than Freud, and is related to something much more archaic. Hence the use of evolutionary theory: the most effective monsters in horror exploit evolved human fears, as well as fears that have been learned (Clasen, 2017).

⁷ In the original book *Jaws* (1974), the shark kills and eats Hooper after he (Hooper) has sex with Ellen, Brody's wife i.e. Hooper is punished for going into her vagina by being eaten by the ultimate representation of the archaic mother's vagina dentata.

All of the various monsters in the universes this book is interested in play upon fears of various kinds. However, some of these fears are clearly more drawn than others: the threatening, toothy, slimy xenomorph is clearly terrifying in all forms. Yet, *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant* clearly show that this sleek emblem of nature's polymorphic perversity is nothing more than the result of bad parenting. The same can be said of any replicant created by Niander Wallace in *Blade Runner: 2049*. Therefore, the book makes an argument centred around the more subtle fears of childbirth, women, and all that they entail.

Chapter 2. More Human Than Human: *Blade Runner 2049*

Blade Runner 2049 has a problem with women. This chapter will focus on feminist analysis of gender and sex in *Blade Runner 2049*, arguing that gender, like humanity in *Blade Runner 2049*, is nothing but a social construct. Additionally, I suggest that *Blade Runner 2049* is one in a long succession of science fiction films that reinforce patriarchal myths about gender and power (Hobby, 2000). *Blade Runner* arguably bleeds over into the cyberpunk realm as well, so a brief background on gender in cyberpunk will be provided. Women's identities in the real-life subcultures of punk, sci-fi fandom and geek fandom, are highly policed. I use Reagle's definition of the term ('to police an identity claim is to challenge a person's association with a category' (Reagle, 2015, p. 2868)). I will also use Reagle's definition of authenticity ('the purported congruence between an individual's subjectivity and his or her enactment of an identity. This process is both social and performative; it is an ongoing negotiation' (Reagle, 2015, p. 2868)).

Because so many female replicants in both the original *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049* are male playthings of various sorts, I will make use of feminist research on the current use, and future production, of female sex robots to frame my argument (Mackenzie, 2018; Richardson, 2015). *Blade Runner 2049* failed with real women at the box office, and it failed in terms of its depictions of fictional women within its universe. This chapter aims to summarise current theories and suggest new ones as to why these failures occurred. This chapter also touches on robotics and other aspects of technology, which are a part of a larger technological industry. As stated in the introduction, other academics (and myself) have argued that a masculine, cult-like culture is rife in the tech industry (Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2019). There are also numerous historical associations concerning normative masculinity and technology (Haddad, 2019). Therefore, any mention of technology will be seen through the lens of these arguments.

Gender in Cyberpunk

Cyberpunk is a sub-genre of science fiction, marked by connecting our real-life present to a fictional, imagined future that must, in some way, be tangible or possible to the reader (Harrison, 2012). Drug use, homicide, sex work and armed conflict are also commonly found in cyberpunk (Heineman, 2012), as well as a gritty, decaying urban setting (Cavallaro, 2000).

Young writes that:

The original film [*Blade Runner*] was a product of the 1980s in that it was a direct extrapolation of the fears and anxieties that existed at the time. It was developed amidst the personal electronics boom and against the expectations of Japan emerging as the world's next superpower... Visions of the future are never really predictions; they are proxies for the projection of the fears and anxieties of the present day (Young, 2019, p. 128).

The fear of an “other” is clearly a driving factor within the aesthesis of *Blade Runner* (1982).

Young's article also includes an interview with Paul Inglis, the supervising art director of *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), who states:

In looking to *Blade Runner 2049* you shouldn't make the mistake of looking to our own 2049; you have to extend along the specific *Blade Runner* timeline and extrapolate what their future might be from the technologies that they had in the original film... Our director Denis Villeneuve always uses the word “brutal” to describe existence on earth in 2049... You should see the manifestation of technology rather than focusing on how it works.... We already are a manufactured landscape, that's the truth of it. (Young, 2019, pp. 128-135)

By showing the bleak future of the manufactured landscape that we currently live in, Inglis cements Young's (2019) thesis. My primary argument isn't about *mise-en-scène*, but it is important in the films I am discussing. Another trademark of cyberpunk is the presence of large, corporate conglomerates, digital cybernetics (and the resulting impact on the human condition) and characters addressing these themes via the subversive, anti-establishment ideals of punk music and aesthetics (Harrison, 2012).

The punk rock genre is a foundational part of cyberpunk and, as indicated by other academics, therefore worthy of its own analysis (Harrison, 2012). Punk can be defined as a

combination of music, corporeal styling and behaviours intended to upset norms and establishment aesthetics (Harrison, 2012). Many scholars have studied gender in music dominated by men, such as punk rock. Punk rock and the blurring of gender lines has a long history: notably, RuPaul played with gender as the lead singer of Wee Wee Pole, long before they became a drag icon (Sisley, 2016). Playing with gender in punk is not limited to RuPaul; it should, in theory, also apply to cyberpunk as a whole. Studies on whether cyberpunk, like some other forms of punk, upsets preconceived notions on identity, are not new (Harrison, 2012). Harrison suggests that, on the surface, punk and cyberpunk are connected, as each subgenre is based around a war between the artificial and the natural, and the inevitable deconstruction of each. For Harrison, punk is preoccupied with resisting the mainstream, which in turn could potentially cause the resistance offered by punk, to 'be read as becoming another regulatory discourse, one which reinforces a binary opposition and erases subjectivities which do not fit this model, rather than functioning as the discomfiting, shifting force' (Harrison, 2012, p. 215). This is far from the subversive potential that punk has to offer regarding the rethinking of gendered bodies. Harrison's work on cyberpunk, punk, and gender included academic references to how Riot Grrrl politics were commodified by mainstream culture, causing them to lose their message that any woman (not just one who subscribes to mainstream beauty norms) can use music to express anger at a patriarchal global order that marginalises them (Schilt, 2003). Harrison mentions how the 'DIY' approach to 'technology, resistance to authority, street slang and gang dress code' (Harrison, 2012, p. 210) are popular associations that cyberpunk also shares with punk.

The gender constructions of the contemporary international anarchist punk scene could also be seen as relevant here (Nicholas, 2007). In this scene, scholars have argued that there is more than a binary, 'Do It Yourself' attitude to gender, related to the scene's rejection of the mainstream (Nicholas, 2007). These bands have also utilized a DIY attitude

to musical production, recording and releasing music by themselves without mainstream support, as well as organizing informal gigs (Nicholas, 2007, p. 1). Scholars have argued that this attitude has spilled over to other aspects of the international anarchist punk scene, and extends to gender construction: those involved in this scene deconstruct gender as a site of authority and reconstruct it on autonomous non-hierarchical terms (Nicholas, 2007, p. 1). Therefore, those in the international anarchist punk scene are also performing their gender, connecting them to Butler's theory of gender as performative (Nicholas, 2007). There is evidence of subversion in the zines (fan-made magazines) of the international anarchist punk scene, which featured a DIY guide to gender pronouns, and use of the word 'humyn' to disrupt the gender binary (Nicholas, 2007, p. 14). The zines are distributed by those within the international anarchist punk scene, as well as 'womyn only' workshops at anarchist/DIY festivals, which attempted to carve out a space for women in the male-dominated scene (Nicholas, 2007, p. 14). However, few if any cyberpunk fictional texts adhere to such a 'punk' attitude, as found in the international anarchist punk scene.

Being involved in a 'punk' scene is not a panacea for patriarchy. Several scholars on punk music scenes note racism and sexism within punk (Leblanc, 2002; Moore, 2004), two belief systems that are a part of the establishment hierarchy (Guillaumin, 1995). The same conclusions can be drawn regarding themes in cyberpunk as a whole. Scholars have noted how cyberpunk confines itself to stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity, despite the supposedly disruptive nature of the punk rock subgenre itself (Harrison, 2012). In describing cyberpunk print fiction, Nixon writes, 'Cyberpunk fiction is, in the end, not radical at all. Its slickness and apparent subversiveness conceal a complicity with '80s conservatism' (Nixon, 1992, p. 231). This broadly remains true to this day, no matter what media (film, print fiction etc.) cyberpunk fiction appears in. There is little of this gender play in cyberpunk, as discussed further below.

Gender in cyberpunk has already been the focus of academic study. Academics have noted that cyberpunk often lacks transgressive versions of sexuality or gender, instead relying on amplifying masculine narratives and silencing feminine ones: in this way, the genre has not lived up to its potential (Ertung, 2011). Other scholarly critics have noted that the genre is marked by a contemporary (rather than futuristic) idealised version of masculinity, through the reinforcement of current (toxic) gender norms throughout various cyberpunk works (Wolmark, 1995). Like women involved in allegedly 'subversive' music subgenres and scenes, such as heavy metal (Vasan, 2010), women in cyberpunk are also policed. Scholars have indicated that the hyper-sexualisation and feminisation of characters in cyberpunk, through their decisions, corporeal styling and goals, are examples of this policing (individuals coded as women or female must be 'sexy' to be accepted) and negates any potential challenge to submissive femininity (Cavallaro, 2000; Gillis, 2007).

Much of the study of gender in cyberpunk has focused on one of cyberpunk's most common character archetypes and/or themes: the cyborg i.e. the augmentation of the human body through technological means (Wilkinson & Stobie, 2017). Scholars have long connected the refashioning of the human body via technological advancement to the reconstruction of gender: as the flesh is displaced by technological advancement, so should gender norms (Balsamo, 1996). The disappearance of the corporeal body due to the fusion of technology and biology could, as other scholars have noted, lead to opportunities for gender experimentation, reconstruction and play (Cavallaro, 2000). While many characters can and do change their gender identity (which would give cyberpunk an association with gender fluidity and moving beyond the binary), scholars have rightly noted that this is a façade (Heineman, 2012). Although a cyberpunk character's identity or gender identity may be changed or blurred via technology, 'it is common for characters to use technology to attain

hypermasculine or hyperfeminine ideals of physical appearance or emotional character’ (Heineman, 2012, p. 62).

Not all cyberpunk texts are so disappointing. Wilkinson and Stobie have argued that the cyberpunk novel *Moxyland* by Lauren Beukes (2008) challenges cyberpunk’s traditional representations of masculinity and femininity (Wilkinson & Stobie, 2017). Beukes encourages her readers to be critical of Toby, a character with a clear allegiance to patriarchal hegemonic masculinity, throughout the text (Wilkinson & Stobie, 2017). Thus, she also ‘mounts an implicit critique of the cyberpunk’s genre’s conventional treatment of gender, as well as the patriarchal power relations it promotes’ (Wilkinson & Stobie, 2017, p. 65). Additionally, female characters in *Moxyland* (2008) rebel against ‘cyberpunk’s tendency to restrict the transgressive potential of its empowered female characters by framing them in terms of highly sexualised femininity’ (Wilkinson & Stobie, 2017, p. 75), challenging essentialist notions of gender by having these women exhibit stereotypically masculine traits. A very skilled hacker in *Moxyland* (2008) is a woman, indicating that at least one woman in this fictional universe ‘challenges discourses that see femininity and technology as being at odds with each other’ (Wilkinson & Stobie, 2017, p. 75). Wilkinson and Stobie frame another character’s decision to become a cyborg as a ‘potentially transgressive’ blending of technology, femininity and biology, noting that this is done without her becoming a spectacle for the male gaze (ibid.). The novel also features a positive representation of homosexuality (Wilkinson & Stobie, 2017). Overall, then, this text may not adhere to cyberpunk’s genre norms, while arguably adhering more closely to what the genre norms *ought* to be.

While subversive examples of cyberpunk fiction do exist, it is safe to say that they are few and far between. As this chapter will show, *Blade Runner 2049*’s depiction of gender is far from subversive. This, sadly, makes *Blade Runner 2049* the norm in the cyberpunk genre. Haraway famously said that ‘by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we

are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs' (Haraway, 1991, p. 150). Based on the reinforcement of gender hierarchies by both the modern world and cyberpunk, I think many of us are still very much flesh and blood.

Sex Robots

Because one of the main themes of *Blade Runner 2049* is replicant reproduction, a brief background on the academic study of sex robots and tech will be provided here. Sex robots are an 'obvious market for humanoid robots we're likely to see in the future' (Winfield, 2012, p. 75). This could be related to the sex industry's willingness to adopt to new technology, from videocassette tapes, to the internet, to entrepreneurs fitting sensors, actuators, and rudimentary artificial intelligence to sex dolls (Winfield, 2012). Sex robots are often female (Gibson, 2020). While the robot sex workers that populate *Blade Runner 2049* remain a distant fantasy for now, it is 'depressingly possible that the first mass market for humanoid robots might be as sex toys or sex companions' (Winfield, 2012, p. 175).

Humanoid robots as sex toys and companions have caused scholars to raise queries surrounding the act itself. These range from the analytical to the metaphysical, the ethical and the sociological (Danaher, 2017). As Danaher asks, could sex with a sophisticated sex robot even 'count' as sex, or is it a very elaborate form of masturbation? Would virginity (another social construct) be preserved if one only had sex with sex robots, and not humans? Is it possible to have a meaningful relationship with a robot? Would having sex with a robot constitute infidelity if you already had a human partner, or owned multiple robots? What consequences would having sex with a robot have if someone then wanted to move on to a relationship with a human?

Certainly, studies of young men who watched a lot of porn before they had significant sexual experiences of their own usually show they were damaged by it (Albury, 2014;

Luscombe, 2016; Orenstein, 2020). Some of these young men find that they need to consume increasingly extreme forms of pornography to become aroused, or suffer from porn-induced erectile dysfunction (meaning that their bodies only respond to the sight of porn, rather than a human partner) (Luscombe, 2016). I am not sure that having sex with a woman-like robot over whom you have control, who has no agency, and who is ultimately disposable is likely to teach young men to treat their human partners with respect, or to act as the basis for a healthy and fulfilling relationship. Scholars indicate that a sophisticated sex robot would straddle the line between object (e.g. a typical sex toy) and subject (a human sexual partner) (Migotti & Wyatt, 2017). What about young women, or women in general? Until recently, literature regarding women's arousal, interest, and consumption of porn has been conspicuous by its absence (Neville, 2015; Meehan, 2020). One study that focused on women who identified as porn consumers showed that their participants consumed digital porn to become closer with their own sexuality, as well as to increase connectivity in their sexual relationships (McKeown, Parry & Light, 2015). Other scholars note how feminist online communities can allow women to unpack their approaches, involvements, and understandings of porn (Blair, 2009; Meehan, 2020). Mainly, however, the literature is focuses on women-centered objections of porn, which means that feminist positions on porn have been minimised or disregarded (Gleeson, 2013)

Some argue that if sex robots are no more than aids to masturbation (or aids to having sex with a human partner), they would therefore be no different than the various sex toys currently on offer, and would not raise any 'distinctive social, ethical, or conceptual problems' (Migotti & Wyatt, 2017, p. 22). For sex robots to truly have sex with us, the robots would need complete sexual agency, and with that, the familiar interactions and questions related to consent, fidelity, pornography, sex work and emotional bonds come into play (Migotti & Wyatt, 2017).

Some scholars say sex robots could be beneficial for society, by promoting pleasure (McArthur, 2017). However, this line of McArthur's argument, which notes that sex robots could potentially distribute sexual experience more widely, give me pause. Firstly, pleasure does not equate to intimacy. Secondly, McArthur's definition of 'sexual inequality' consists of people who would benefit if the oppressive power structures marginalising them were dismantled. This included those in the military, those with anxiety around body image, adults with little to no sexual experience, those who have recently transitioned genders, those who have various other anxieties about sex, and people who are victims of stigma due to their appearance and/or physical disabilities (McArthur, 2017). I am surprised that McArthur does not note that another way to resolve these problems would be dismantling toxic masculinity, toxic beauty standards and patriarchy. Thirdly, if we conclude that sex-robots are an elaborate and sophisticated form of masturbation, such a practice does not solve any of the problems of the people in the groups just listed. Rather, this would create a new form of inequality i.e. privileged men get to have sex with real women; less privileged men get to have sex/masturbate with increasingly less complex sex dolls as their privilege reduces; under-privileged men don't have anything we would recognise as sex at all. Sex robots are not going to dismantle the systemic oppressive overarching power structures that cause these issues. McArthur states:

Like other forms of inequality, sexual inequality has a widespread impact on society. When individuals, especially young males, are deprived of the prospect of sexual companionship, they can become a significant source of social instability. Numerous studies suggest that single men are significantly more likely to commit crimes than any other demographic groups, and are in general the main contributors to social disorder. People who are single and without the prospect of companionship are also more depressed, and depend more heavily on social services. We might wonder to what degree the mere possession of a sex bot can alleviate psychological and social costs of sexual deprivation. It is not a perfect solution...however, I would like to suggest a sufficiently realistic sex bot would be better than nothing...whatever our views on sex, then, if we care about the unequal distribution of goods, we should welcome the development of sex bots. (McArthur, 2017, p. 40)

McArthur goes on to suggest that economic inequality regarding access to sex robots can be addressed via affordable, subsidised robot sex workers (McArthur, 2017). There is quite a lot to unpack here. Some of the arguments that McArthur uses for sex robots are almost verbatim those made by incels in justifying the hypothetical enslavement of women. Incels are individuals (overwhelmingly men) who gather to rant about their inability to acquire love and sexual fulfilment (Romano, 2018). Note how McArthur uses the word ‘deprived’ (McArthur, 2017, p. 40) in describing young males who are unable to find willing sexual partners, accepting the problematic premise that young men are *entitled* to sex. ‘Aggrieved entitlement’ is central to the incel movement (as well as the mass shootings that are sometimes perpetrated by those in that movement) (Hoffman et al., 2020). It can be defined as something that

inspires revenge against those who have wronged you, it is the compensation for humiliation. Humiliation is emasculation: humiliate someone and you take away his manhood. For many men, humiliation must be avenged, or you cease to be a man. Aggrieved entitlement is a gendered emotion, a fusion of that humiliating loss of manhood and the moral obligation and entitlement to get it back. (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010, p. 459)

This ‘aggrieved entitlement’ manifests in the incel movement as feeling entitled to the sexual and romantic interests of women, while bitterly resenting women they perceive as having ‘rejecting’ them (Romano, 2018). It is important to note that the ‘rejection’ here is perceived rather than real. Often, victims of incel-related violence may not even know their killer: they just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Another hallmark of the incel movement is violent, virulent misogyny (Palma, 2019). In McArthur’s arguments, he (again, like incels) shifts the blame from patriarchy to a lack of sexual access as the cause of societal woes. McArthur’s arguments are framed in a way that suggests that everyone is entitled to sex, again aligning him with the incel movement: one incel manifesto revealed that the writer thought ‘men such as himself are entitled to sex by virtue of the natural order’ (Kelly, 2020,

p. 97). Another incel suggested that ‘educated men’ should decide how to distribute women among the male population (Kelly, 2020).¹ I think academics must proceed with extreme care when their arguments can so easily be associated with such an odious movement, and endeavour to distance themselves from such people (McArthur does not do this).²

Another issue arises when McArthur compares ‘sexual inequality’ to other forms of inequality. Here, it reads as if McArthur is insinuating that a man who could not find a consensual sex partner is as persecuted as (for example) a person of colour. This is false. For instance, I have never heard of the police murdering a man who can’t get laid, unlike men of colour (Powell, 2016). One cannot tell if someone is sexually active or not by looking at them: such a status relies upon their testimony, which may not be truthful. It is, therefore, very difficult to discriminate against such a group in a systematic way as McArthur is suggesting. The fact that McArthur thinks it is appropriate to de-contextualise those suffering from ‘sexual inequality’ alongside these incel groups is poor scholarship. Studies on white masculine victimhood go into far more depth on these issues than I can here (Kelly, 2020). Still, I think it is important to note that,

white men’s networks will fight tooth and claw to retain their privileges and evade scrutiny for their treatment of women and the vulnerable. Victimhood remains a refuge for white men to, when cornered, turn the tables on the marginalized when they demand justice (Kelly, 2020, p. 157).

Comparing the ‘sexually unequal’ to other marginalised groups of society (who can face life-threatening consequences of their subjugation) certainly reads as ‘turning the tables on the marginalised when they demand justice’ (Kelly, 2020, p. 157) to me. None of the problems that McArthur outlines here would be resolved by sex robots, because he has taken incel culture at face value, accepting the notion that these men really would be happier if they

¹ I have not named these violent incel individuals in this work as I do not want to glorify them or their crimes.

² This is not the only instance in which incel rhetoric is relevant in the context of *Blade Runner 2049*: the next chapter discusses how Niander Wallace utilises incel ideals in his quest to build a new world.

could have the sexual fulfilment to which they feel so entitled (and that sex robots would be an appropriate and safe way to meet that ‘need’).

Scholars have mentioned that the seemingly harmless adult fun available via sex robots can come with a variety of dangers. Firstly, sex with a robot might be physically unsafe, in that it might explode or malfunction (Winfield, 2012). Currently available sex robots are described as ‘relatively crude and unsophisticated’ (Danaher, 2017, p. 6), which makes this potential danger a (pertinent) possibility. Long-term dangers arise if a sophisticated sex or companion robot enters the market, as intimate robot-human relationships raise multiple questions, ranging from societal and ethical issues to the impacts a robot-human intimate relationship might have on human psychology, as already sketched out (Danaher, 2017; Winfield, 2012). There are many who argue that if a robot only behaves *as if* it has feelings, it could genuinely become a true companion on an emotional level (Winfield, 2012). Understanding that, some scientists believe that if you can trust a sufficiently advanced robot, the ‘as if’ disappears, making the robot a genuinely feeling being (Winfield, 2012).

Blade Runner 2049 presents robot sex workers as genuinely feeling beings. This is clear in the presentation of more advanced sex worker models, who call themselves ‘real girls’. One such character, Mariette, uses her ‘real girl’ distinction to throw shade at Joi, a hologram model of artificial intelligence, by saying Joi isn’t as smart or emotionally complex as she thinks (*Blade Runner 2049*). This is seemingly another variation on the ingrained sexist stereotype of the back-handed compliment ‘you’re not like other girls’ (Crosby, 2018). This statement is not only sexist (insulting the ‘other girls’ that are often depicted as pathetic, feeble, or indigent): it also pits girls and women against each other (Crosby, 2018). In *Blade Runner 2049*, seemingly harmless adult fun (or, as McArthur argues, a societally beneficial transaction is tainted and twisted by overarching issues of toxic masculinity found in

cyberpunk. Robot sex in *Blade Runner 2049* is a loser's game.

Gender in Blade Runner 2049

Scholars have rightly argued that '2049 is a return, if not outright amplification, of *Blade Runner*'s misogyny' (Murphy, 2020, p. 97). Quotes from interviews with the director indicate that Villeneuve almost takes offense at criticisms of the portrayal of women in *Blade Runner 2049*, stating,

I am very sensitive to how I portray women in movies. This is my ninth feature film and six of them have women in the lead role. The first *Blade Runner* was quite rough on the women; something about the film noir aesthetic. But I tried to bring depth to all the characters. For Joi, the holographic character, you see how she evolves. It's interesting, I think.

What is cinema? Cinema is a mirror on society. *Blade Runner* is not about tomorrow; it's about today. And I'm sorry, but the world is not kind on women.

There's a sense in American cinema: you want to portray an ideal world. You want to portray a utopia. That's good—dreams for a better world, to advocate for something better, yes. But if you look at my movies, they are exploring today's shadows. The first *Blade Runner* is the biggest dystopian statement of the last half century. I did the follow-up to that, so yes, it's a dystopian vision of today. Which magnifies all the faults. That's what I'll say about that. (Villeneuve in Hoffman, 2017, para. 27-29)

Villeneuve seems to be passing the buck here. He claims to have tried to 'bring depth' to female characters, while seemingly failing to acknowledge that his chosen example (Joi) is literally a hologram. While there is clearly overwhelming evidence that the world is not a kind place to women (Storkey, 2015), our current timeline contains both a history and contemporary examples of mass protests (Green, 1994; Kitch, 2018), successfully advancing women's rights. In Villeneuve's take on the future, nothing similar to either of those movements has occurred for women in *Blade Runner 2049*, indicating that the feminist movement has perished with the planet.

Of course, neither past nor current women's rights movements are perfect. Feminism has always struggled with intersectionality and advocating for the rights of all women.

Examples range from suffragettes in the 1800s utilising racism and racist talking points to secure the right to vote for white women only (Crass, 2010), to the US Women's March in 2017 being seen as a way to provide white women with a means to protest the election, in lieu of addressing the ways in which social injustice disproportionately impacts women of colour or women in lower social classes (Brewer & Dundes, 2018). Scholars have noted that, through casting, *Blade Runner 2049* has made a muted attempt to show that people of colour exist in the future (Chan, 2020). Chan argues that *Blade Runner 2049* does not take away from the overarching themes found in the series as a whole: people of colour are relegated to background roles, and are subject to being seen through lens of radical otherness, as opposed to the white actors who play the main characters (Chan, 2020). For instance, K's major love interest Joi is played by a Cuban-born Latina actress, Ana de Armas. She is signified as exotic and sexual, in lieu of belonging to a specific ethnicity, which to Chan, 'renders her membership in the category of whiteness moot' (Chan, 2020, p. 70).

Chan neglects to mention that the version of Joi seen in *Blade Runner 2049* is one that K specifically chose to purchase: the Joi we see is an option on Wallace's software. Thus, I think Chan fails to connect this to representations of the Latina woman as the 'exotic other' (Martynuska, 2016), or the numerous examples of Latina tropicalism in US culture (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2010). The Latina body is often portrayed as dangerous to white male characters, highlighted with visual close-ups of her eyes, lips, breasts and buttocks (Molina & Valdivia, 2010). This certainly occurs with Joi, and to me, it is clear that Joi is both highly racialised and highly sexualised in a way that is in line with (inherently patriarchal) US cultural norms. Other scholars have noted this as well: Murphy notes that both Joi and the geisha in the original *Blade Runner* are products of 'a neoliberal capitalist system that merely trades the techno-orientalist geisha of Blade Runner for the trope of the sultry and seductive Cuban in 2049' (Murphy, 2020, p. 102). Chan goes on:

Even while the world is going to hell (i.e. becoming non-white), white people still perform the main roles and are at the centre of narrative reality. While I do not want to overstate what is happening in terms of race in the Blade Runner cycle – that is, I do not think that the films are fearmongering – I do think they participate in the panicked sense of an impending demographic dystopia. As a form of Wagner’s category of retro-noir, the feature films of the Blade Runner cycle perform a retrograde recuperation of whiteness while assigning non-whiteness to the background or to abject roles. Colour is a ubiquitous and mostly silent peril against which the white main characters play out their drama. (Chan, 2020, p. 74)

To Chan, the extinction of whiteness contributes to the dystopian horror of *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles (Chan, 2020). For some viewers, I agree that this certainly might be true.

Perhaps the world is so bad for women on the whole, and whiteness so prevalent in the world of *Blade Runner*, because only privileged white women (like those criticised by other feminists when discussing the US Women’s March (Brewer & Dundes, 2018)) were able to obtain the rights they wanted off-world, leaving the rest behind to pick up the pieces, and build what they could.

Ode to Joi

Although *Blade Runner 2049* is a relatively recent text, much analysis of Joi has already occurred. Joi is a digital companion, designed by the Wallace corporation (“Everything you want to hear. Everything you want to see” (*Blade Runner 2049*)). K purchases Joi from the same company that made K himself (Simmons, 2019). Academics have likened this relationship between two manufactured beings to ‘a phone app falling in love with a microwave oven’ (Simmons, 2019, p. 35). I will summarise existing contributions and attempt to bring new analysis to contextualising Joi’s ringtone (from Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*) alongside gender analysis of *Peter and the Wolf* (Devlin & Belton, 2020).

Joi may serve to challenge the audience’s views on biological determinism, as well as leading viewers to accept digital beings into humanity (Simmons, 2019). As mentioned above, in interviews, Villeneuve has claimed that this holographic character is a good

example of an interesting female character in *Blade Runner 2049*, showing depth and growth throughout the film (Hoffman, 2017). This is despite notes in the script describing Joi as ‘goddess, girlfriend, geisha and, right now, goddam bombshell’ (Fancher & Green, p. 15). As other scholars have noted, Joi is offered acceptance in the human sphere much as Rachael was offered acceptance in *Blade Runner*: via ‘sexuality and love’ (Simmons, 2019, p. 36). Rachael’s rape scene in *Blade Runner* does not seem like love to me. Additionally, Simmons seems to neglect the problematic nature of sexualisation being used as a tactic to humanise (and dehumanise) ‘the other’. Research has shown that focus on a woman’s physical appearance (as opposed to seeing a woman as a person) ‘is associated with lower attribution of competence, human nature, warmth, competence and morality (i.e., as object-like)’ (Bernard et al., 2018, p. 113). Sexualised women are also seen as less competent and intelligent than non-sexualised women (Bernard et al., 2018; Loughnan et al., 2015; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez & Puvia, 2013), and are frequently associated with terms more often used to describe animals (such as being a chick, chickenhead, cougar or vixen) (Bernard et al., 2018; Rodriguez, 2009; Vaes et al., 2011). Studies have also indicated that people are slower to associate sexualised women with agentic words (Bernard et al., 2018; Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2010). These associations surrounding sexualised women are dehumanising and have consequences (Haslam, 2006). One example is evidence showing that implicit associations between female words (like ‘she’) and animal/object concepts is correlated to sexism, as well as negative attitudes towards rape victims (Rudman & Mescher, 2012). All the evidence shows that if replicant women are indeed being humanised and offered acceptance through ‘sexualisation and love’, as Simmons (2019) suggests, neither Joi or Rachael are very humanised. Like modern women, they remain othered: not entirely human.

Film critics have noted that Joi’s initial relationship with K is unequivocally

transactional: Joi's marketing tagline indicates that she has little to no agency (Meslow, 2017). Scholars have noted that writers may have tried to address issues of consent subtly within the dialogue. Murphy writes:

There does seem to be genuine emotion between K (replicant) and Joi (digital simulation) throughout 2049 and, in an interesting scene, Joi says 'I'm so happy when I'm with you', prompting K's response: 'You don't have to say that', almost as if 2049 is aware of Deckard's earlier assault of Rachael and tries to offer some kind of course correction in K and Joi's seemingly consensual relationship (Murphy, 2020, p. 101).

To me, it seems that K tells this to lie to himself: K, his ego, and his emotions are the primary focus of this statement, not Joi or issues of consent. By reassuring Joi that she doesn't have to tell him that she's happy when she's with him, K is in fact reassuring himself. K wants to think that what he and Joi share is special and mutually chosen, even though Joi is programmed to make him happy. This seems far more believable than Murphy's assertion that this conversation is about consent, or some kind of rejection of rape culture in *Blade Runner* (Murphy, 2020).

An awkward and problematic sex scene between Joi, K and Mariette (a replicant 'real girl' sex worker) has been commonly discussed in the context of Joi and *Blade Runner 2049*. Some academics view this scene as Joi achieving a form of physical intimacy, assisting in fulfilling K's needs and therefore strengthening their relationship (Devlin & Belton, 2020). While Joi's hologram projection over Mariette is 'slightly out of synch, displaying a certain uncanniness' (Devlin & Belton, 2020, p. 368), Devlin & Belton argue that this scene seems to dismiss the belief that Joy is a sexual fantasy, instead framing Joi having sex with K as an almost subversive act against oppressive power structures:

Meanwhile, K's position as a capitalist object---owned by the police---is mirrored by Joi's position as a consumer good. The inability of these couples to physically have sex represents their broader alienation against a capitalistic system. (Devlin & Belton, 2020, p. 369)

I am not convinced this is the case, based on the fact that Joi derives no discernable physical pleasure from the lovemaking (which Devlin and Belton acknowledge, and relate to the stereotype that the real reason heterosexual women are intimate with their partners is solely to emotionally please ‘their man’ (Devlin & Belton, 2020)). Devlin & Belton argue that Joi is a love fantasy, not a sexual fantasy. They appear to suggest that this makes her more worthy of personhood; that sex workers themselves cannot be both; and that tropes around love and sex workers do not exist (Ruti, 2016). Still, Devlin & Belton say that Joi is a refutation that ‘anything authentically loved can be controlled’ (Devlin & Belton, 2020, p. 371), although this fantasy is often utilised in the marketing and sale of sex robots (Devlin & Belton, 2020).

The imperfect synch or ‘lags’ in this scene are interpreted differently by other academics. To Murphy, this contributes to the viewers’ discomfort, making the scene awkward ‘because Joi remains nothing more than a digital projection and Mariette is nothing more than a marionette – clearly evoked in her name’ (Murphy, 2020, p. 101). Murphy then connects Mariette to *Blade Runner*’s Pris, based on the fact that both Mariette and Pris are fashioned after living dolls (Murphy, 2020). Clearly, Murphy sees this sex act as the excription of women, rather than the inclusion. She analyses the scene as containing one woman (Joi, a hologram) not really there at all, and another (Mariette) giving no indication that she enjoyed the encounter. Murphy calls Mariette a ‘cyberpunk meat puppet’ (Murphy, 2020, p. 101), but, based on Mariette’s underdeveloped side-plot (which shows her to be involved with a replicant resistance network), Murphy still positions Joi as significantly worse off than Mariette (Murphy, 2020). Other academics agree, saying that Joi’s digital existence makes her a ‘third class entity’ (Simmons, 2019, p. 36). I am inclined towards Murphy’s interpretation of Joi, as opposed to Devlin & Belton’s. To me, Joi’s story reads of subjugation, not the untamed inner nature of loving with a real or artificial wild heart.

While Mariette can move around freely, Joi is contained by projection hardware, and

then by portable hardware. Murphy uses this to highlight Joi's lack of agency: 'her movement is entirely at the discretion of the owner and, by extension, the neoliberal capitalist order that underwrites the entire system' (Murphy, 2020, p. 101). While it is compelling to wonder if Joi has transcended her programming or whether we can determine if her feelings were 'genuine', Joi still dies in *Blade Runner 2049* before we can find out the answers to these questions. Jo dies while begging Luv to spare a wounded K, only to 'die' via her portable hardware being crushed by Luv's boot (Murphy, 2020). I couldn't help but be reminded of the policing that goes on in other subcultures or fandoms, where women are constantly monitored. For example, in geek cultures, speaking a fictional language like Klingon or collecting comic books (which are coded as pursuits men are interested in, and are more involved in) is more acceptable than creating fan videos or cosplays (which are coded as pursuits women are interested in, or more likely to be involved in) (Busse, 2013). Once again, it is Joi, a hologram woman, that must prove her authenticity (as opposed to any of the male characters), aligning the real experiences of women with their fictional replicant representatives.

The ringtone associated with Joi whenever she pops up onscreen in K's home, as noted by other scholars, is 'Peter's Theme,' from *Peter and the Wolf* by Prokofiev. More specifically, it is from *David Bowie Narrates Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf* (1978).³ Joi's ringtone is so associated with her that hearing it prompts Mariette to realise that K may prefer digital beings to biological replicants. *Peter and the Wolf* is a musical composition in which a narrator tells a story, while the orchestra illustrates it: each creature in the story is represented by a different musical theme and instrument, including Peter (strings). In *Peter and the Wolf*, Prokofiev deliberately created a piece of music that would be a 'symphonic fairy tale' (Moss, 2001, p. 188) of 'masculine initiation' (Moss, 2001, p. 188): Peter reaffirms his masculine

³ Bowie was one of Villeneuve's original choices to play Niander Wallace; however, Jared Leto eventually got the part (King, 2017).

power by capturing the predatory wolf, ensuring the safety of the more vulnerable animals (Moss, 2001). Prokofiev allows the fairy tale to guide instrumental choices (Pyshkin, 2017). At first glance, this is the also case in *Blade Runner 2049*: the plot dictates when we hear the ringtone, signalling the arrival of a particular character. The ringtone is heard seven times in the film (there are seven characters in *Peter and the Wolf*). The final time is when an advertisement of Joi approaches K. By all standards, the advertisement *is* Joi, but not the Joi K and the audience have come to know. This prompts K to save Deckard, killing Luv and mortally wounding himself in the process, suggesting that *Blade Runner 2049* and *Peter and the Wolf* are both fairy tales of masculine initiation. Like Peter, K proves himself by making himself and others bleed for his cause, reaffirming his masculine power. Joi is no more than a stepping stone for K on his path to masculine greatness.

2049 could have done something different here, if it wanted to: there are other interpretations of the story. Angela Carter's version of *Peter and the Wolf* (Carter, 1986) still has Peter as the narrator, but he is fearful, uncertain, and certainly not triumphant. The wolf is also different: a wolf-girl fostered by wolves, who is linked to nature, and is Peter's cousin (Stace, 2018). Scholars have noted that the wolf-girl in Carter's *Wolf* is truly 'other', not only because of her gender (which is doubly 'othered' here, due to the fact that werewolves and wolves are often a decidedly 'masculine' threat in most myths and retellings (DiGioia, 2016)), but because of she is neither fully animal nor fully human (Jennings, 2012). Much like the replicants in *Blade Runner 2049*, the wolf-girl is a liminal character. Freudian scholars claim that Carter's re-telling of *Peter and the Wolf* challenges Freud's image of woman-as-castrate (Carter does so by introducing an 'intact female body' (Wyatt, 1996, p. 551) into the cultural imaginary) (Wyatt, 1996).⁴ Other scholars argue that Carter connecting the wolf-girl to nature is the result of ingrained misogyny under patriarchy, which is rooted in

⁴ Again, it should be noted that one does not need to have female sex organs in order to be a woman.

cis-women's reproductive and childbirth cycles: women are tied to the earth, whereas men can transcend to (monotheistic) godliness, which, by this argument, makes men the only ones qualified for leadership (Stace, 2018). Peter being taught to fear the wolf in Carter's version of the myth is also interpreted as a fairy tale that shows gender is constructed (based on the paragraphs that show Peter's grandmother questioning him about how he knew the child among the wolves was a girl) (Moss, 2001). Carter's fairy tale also features the fear of feminine sexuality, as taught to boys by patriarchy: 'In this tale the grotesque and the female merge, creating a female grotesque that offers an other version of sexuality and desire' (Moss, 2001, p. 191). While *2049* does feature an 'other' version of sexuality in desire in Joi that exists on the borderlines of human and non-human, unlike the freedom of Carter's wolf-girl, Joi is bound. As previously mentioned, Joi cannot freely roam anywhere, and is always dependant on someone else.

However, even if Joi could run free, neither her, nor Carter's Wolf-Girl, is in a friendly world for a woman, or an individual of any other marginalised gender. In Carter's *Peter and the Wolf*, one of the largest, angriest wolves challenges the men seeking to prevent the initial abduction of their packmate. This wolf is described as a 'big angry bitch' (Carter, 1986, p. 61), who is subsequently blasted to bits by Peter's Father's shotgun. Scholars suggest that here, Carter shows the 'brutality of masculine containment of the feminine' (Moss, 2001, p. 192). The shot-down she-wolf also shows how masculine power that is associated with violence can lead to non-negotiable annihilation, especially if someone, or something, is gendered as being female, 'other' or both (Moss, 2001). Understanding that, at the end of Carter's retelling, Peter does not triumphantly carry the slaughtered wolf-girl into the village, reaffirming his toxic masculinity associated with subjugation and violence. Instead, Carter's Peter uses a second sighting of the wolf-girl as a catalyst for material transcendence. Peter re-enters the village fully aware of life's potential, and 'into a different

story' (Carter, 1986, p. 61). Compare this to *Blade Runner*, which ends with two tropes that reinforce masculinity: a life-ending heroic sacrifice by an individual coded as male (K) (Daly, 1993), and an absent father making up for lost time with the child they just met (Lavoie, 2015). In lieu of being a true cautionary tale that ends with a harrowing final warning, just prior to the promise of transcendence and new beginnings, *Blade Runner 2049* is a reinscription of the same old song of patriarchal subjugation.

Women's Rejection of Blade Runner 2049

71% of the opening weekend ticket-buyers for *Blade Runner 2049* were male (Murphy, 2020). Critics such as Ben Child from *The Guardian* implied that *Blade Runner 2049* failed because it was *not* a mindless super hero film: instead, *Blade Runner 2049* is a 'blockbuster with brains, a hugely entertaining romp through the dystopian future that also functions properly as an existential thinkpiece' (Child, 2017, n. pg). A hugely entertaining romp for cis-men, perhaps, who did not mind the replicants and human women restrained and reduced by the chains of masculinity and capitalism. Instead, I agree with Child's co-worker at *The Guardian* Ann Smith, who lamented the fact that this newest cinema incarnation of the *Blade Runner* universe did so little to advance or explore the treatment of women in that universe. This could be related to issues surrounding the male gaze (Oliver, 2017), a team of male writers and a male director for *Blade Runner 2049*.

Villeneuve mused that *Blade Runner 2049* was a box office failure because of its huge budget (which required a massive audience attendance to offset it), the length of the film (over two hours) and failing to appeal to cinema-goers under the age of 25 (who may not have seen the original *Blade Runner* (1982)) (Child, 2017). However, some academics also pointed at the plot of *Blade Runner 2049* itself. While I agree with Murphy's assessment that 'the sequel really does nothing to advance the first film's depiction of the role of women as anything more than puppets or victims to patriarchal and capitalist interests' (Murphy, 2020, p. 105), I disagree that this is the sole reason that the film failed to reach women. I think Murphy does not adequately acknowledge that science fiction as a whole traditionally caters to men, as both potential readers or audience members (Scodari, 2003, p. 118), as well as upholding and conserving heteronormative hegemony. Geek culture, which sits alongside science fiction, is rife with the policing of women, be it regarding their corporeal styling, their authenticity, or their acceptance into geek culture itself (Busse, 2013; Salter & Blodgett,

2017). I think these factors also contribute to women being unwilling to submit themselves to men asking if they are ‘real’ fans of the series, and need to be acknowledged in further academic debates. It should also be noted that this type of ‘gatekeeping’, shepherding, and islanding of women isn’t unique to these films or these types of films: it is prevalent in other subcultures as well, such as metal music fandoms (Shadrack, 2021).

This chapter focused on gender in *Blade Runner 2049*. It opened with a brief synopsis of gender in cyberpunk. It then connected the policing of women in the punk genre to the policing of women in the cyberpunk, science fiction and geek subcultures. I moved on to a concise summary of academic discussions surrounding sex robots. After briefly discussing race in the *Blade Runner* universe, this chapter moved on to analysis of Joi, in terms of both the current literature and her ringtone. The chapter ended with the hypothesis that women did not purchase tickets for *Blade Runner 2049* because of overarching issues with inclusion in geek or science fiction subculture as a whole, in addition to any other arguments provided. The next chapter focuses on birth and parenthood in *Blade Runner 2049*.

Chapter 3. “We were so wrong”: the perversion of male creation. Motherhood, fatherhood and birth in recent incarnations of the *Alien* series

Motherhood and reproduction simultaneously fascinate and repulse horror writers and filmmakers. This chapter will examine motherhood, fatherhood and birth in the *Alien* universe, with a particular focus on the newer works *Prometheus* (2012), *Alien: Covenant* (2017) and *Alien: Isolation* (2014).¹ I argue that, while these narratives take place in a futuristic world, old issues of patriarchy remain; additionally, every text referenced includes the unifying theme of the perversion of male creation carried out by ‘mad scientist’ bad dads. Some might ask, why these films? The first two films in the *Alien* series were resounding box office successes, and the original series expanded from one into a quartet, before the prequels began with *Prometheus*. In the original films, the presence of a resilient woman as the main character (Ripley) was an example of a cross-gender identification ‘space-age female Rambo’ (Clover, 1987, p. 209), whom male viewers engaged with easily. Additionally, the climactic face-off of *Aliens* (1986) is entirely centred on female figures: Ripley faces down the Queen (or Mother) of the Aliens, in order to save a little girl, a far cry from the traditional science fiction trope of a man saving a woman in distress. In fact, there are many mothers in the original *Alien* series: the ship’s computer, the human hosts of the xenomorphs, as well as the aforementioned Ripley (who is a biological and adoptive mother) and Queen Alien. To some scholars (and viewers), then, Ripley represents a blowing away of unsavoury motherhood characteristics, purging the monstrosity of motherhood, while simultaneously maintaining ‘a kinder, gentler maternity, the caring, loyal, nurturing, dependable, sweet mother’ (Zwinger, 1992, p. 85).

¹ The *Alien Isolation* (2014) video game exists within the *Alien* universe and 20th Century Fox has taken the game’s cutscenes to create a ‘digital series’ for IGN ‘to add additional layers to the story of Ellen Ripley’s daughter’ (Schwartz, 2019), strengthening the connection between the video game and the films and hence its inclusion here.

Thus, by showing women triumphing over their extra-terrestrial adversaries, the *Alien* series looked set to become something of a feminist outlier in science fiction. Instead, as it went on, the series fell back on tired tropes. Science fiction as a genre, though created by a woman (Mary Shelley), traditionally caters to a male audience/reader (as, indeed, it could be argued Shelley was also doing (Scodari, 2003, p. 118)) and tends to preserve heteronormative hegemony. Science fiction authors who identify as women often repeat generic conventions regarding sex and gender, although these conventions may be handled differently than by their male counterparts (Donawerth, 1996). This could be because these female science fiction creators are suffering from internalised oppression. Internalised oppression occurs within the consciousness of individuals who are made subordinate by existing hegemonic power structures (like patriarchy) (Freire, 2005; Yisa, 2018) and has also been discussed in the context of the *Alien* series. Some scholars have even claimed to see internalised oppression in the original *Alien* films, remarking that Ripley was far from a feminist hero but rather ‘simply an agreed-upon fiction, and the male viewer's use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies an act of perhaps timeless dishonesty’ (Clover, 1987, p. 214). If the best way to disrupt the power structure between oppressed and oppressor is to hear and learn via the experiences of those who are subordinate (Freire, 2005, p. 42), then the emphasis upon the male viewers’ experience misses the mark. The same argument can be made far more forcefully with regards to *Prometheus* (2012), *Alien: Covenant* (2017) and *Alien: Isolation* (2014). These texts rely on tropes surrounding the importance of motherhood in patriarchal society as the only means for women to achieve fulfilment, even in the year 2091. Feminist studies on futuristic narratives have used imaginative and futuristic settings to ‘test alternative relationships between women and civil society, working through dilemmas about embodiment that feminist political theory has yet to resolve’ (Silbergleid, 1997, p. 160). Authors of these texts, such as Piercy and Russ, transcend ‘woman-centred treatment,

because such treatment invariably perpetuates a family narrative that strives to subordinate women' (Silbergleid, 1997, p. 174). Instead, Piercy and Russ opt to create a new societal narrative of community and cohesion (Silbergleid, 1997).² If political change is, as some feminist scholars of narrative say, reliant on telling the lived experience of human lives in another manner, (Silbergleid, 1997), then we must consider these films as comments on both the present plight of women (thereby asking the audience to seek their own solutions) as well as the future. The future in *Prometheus* (2012), *Alien: Covenant* (2017) and *Alien: Isolation* (2014) is as bleak as it is patriarchal. There is no new storytelling here, therefore, but rather a perpetuation of the stale cycle of motherhood myths.

Examples of the perversion of nature by male creation (and the disastrous results) can be found in three male or male-presenting creators in the *Alien* universe: the Engineers, Peter Weyland, and David, as well as the synthetics in the *Alien* universe. Finally, there is another set of parents in the alien universe: the monstrous mother trilobite,³ hammerpedes,⁴ protomorphs, neomorphs and xenomorphs. Analysis here includes an interview with a special effects artist who worked on *Prometheus* (2012), undertaken specifically for this chapter. In the interest of new analysis, I have made a conscious effort to focus on films that so far have received little critical attention (*Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017), as well as the video game *Alien Isolation* (2014)).⁵ I also attempt to analyse older films from earlier in

² *The Female Man* (1975) by Russ describes a world in which heteronormativity is no longer the norm and disentangles sex from reproduction. *The Female Man* is described by Silbergleid as presenting 'a radical critique of the sex-gender system and offer[ing] multiple possibilities for political change through its thorough subversion of narrative form and content' (Silbergleid, 1997, p. 165). Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) 'presents an alternative paradigm through which to undermine the romance narrative and to redefine citizenship by interrogating the self-interest and competition at the heart of industrial capitalism and technological advancement' (Silbergleid, 1997, p. 165). Sexual difference is also eliminated in Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and birth is presented as a communal good, rather than something that benefits heterosexual unions only.

³ The trilobite was a massive, cephalopod-like creature birthed by Dr Elizabeth Shaw in *Prometheus* (2012), who eventually subdues and impregnates an Engineer at the end of the film.

⁴ The hammerpedes were aliens created by the indigenous worms of planet LV-223 being exposed to Chemical A0-3959X.91-15.

⁵ It should be noted that the developers of *Alien: Isolation* have never stated that this video game is part of the canon, as opposed to the video game *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (2013). I have not included *Aliens: Colonial Marines* in my analysis as there is no connection between Ellen and Amanda Ripley. This game does feature a

the *Alien* franchise in new ways, mindful of overarching themes in the whole *Alien* series. I define the *Alien* universe as a collection of horror texts, because at their core, the films, video games, novels and other ephemera that make up the *Alien* universe all feature familiar horror notions of discovery, confirmation, confrontation and a supernatural dread of the unknown. While science fiction elements are certainly present within this universe, horror is not limited to the supernatural: it can also be biological.

As discussed in the introduction, patriarchal norms indicate that a ‘mother’ physically carries and gives birth to a child, and then takes the lead in nurturing it, a role traditionally assigned to a woman. The ‘father’ is a secondary, ‘supporting’ parent, a role traditionally assigned to a man.⁶ For the sake of brevity, I will plug into heteronormativity in this chapter and use the terms ‘mother’ and ‘father’ to refer to the roles typically filled by women and men, but this should not be interpreted as a value judgment. The terms ‘mother’ and ‘father’ will also refer to spiritual or social mothers and fathers, as opposed to strictly biological relationships. Antifeminist and antifemale backlash, in the guise of sympathy for men or boys, sometimes arises from masculinist studies of fatherhood (Dragiewicz, 2008, p. 121). Understanding that, fathers remain understudied, as a reflection on the societal norm of mothers as primary parents (Dowd, 2010, p. 22). While research has demonstrated fathers’ importance in the nurturing of children, the construction of masculinity hurts and undermines their parenting (Levant & Richmond, 2016, p. 23). The true horror of these films and games lies in ‘concerns about masculinity, its powers, expectations, and limitations, all of which are

mission in which players are asked to remove a xenomorph embryo from a female NPC (non-player character), and are told they cannot, as the xenomorph’s placenta is cancerous, leading to her inevitable death if the embryo is removed (2013). This game was marred by technical issues, was critically panned and was the source of a class action lawsuit against its developer and publisher (as the final game sold looked very different from the promotional materials provided for the game) (Bankhurst, 2018). *Aliens: Colonial Marines* was also released with a typo in the coding of the game configuration file, which partially explains why the xenomorphs in the game can be defeated very easily (Bankhurst, 2018).

⁶ As noted in the introduction, these norms do not recognize the fact that many fathers and mothers have no biological connection to their children; not every child has two parents; not every family exists on the gender binary; not every family consists of heterosexual parents; parental roles can be filled by various household members; and all parents provide some nurturing and support.

heightened by the experience of fatherhood' (Freeland, 2000, p. 239). Often fathers are more sympathetic, well-intentioned figures than mothers in horror texts (DiGioia, 2017). This is true of *Prometheus*, *Covenant*, and *Alien: Isolation*: every father featured here had a noble intention of (variously) creating worlds, creating lifeforms or defeating death. By contrast, the mothers here are either extra-terrestrial killing machines or vessels to be tortured and experimented on by men.

The pursuit of motherhood

Motherhood and reproduction have always been at the centre of feminist discourse about women's rights (Kawash, 2011, p. 93). As mentioned in the introduction, for the first and second waves, this discourse focused on the right to abortion and public recognition of motherhood as important and exhausting labour (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 163). Assisted reproduction started new feminist dialogues surrounding motherhood (Goodwin, 2005, p. 1); however, although technology has helped many women to achieve parenthood, discourses around childbirth remain connected to prevailing beliefs surrounding women's inherent 'natural' characteristics. Even today, 'cultural femininity and biological reproduction are curiously synonymous in the proclamations of medical science about women' (Oakley, 1981, p. 50). The feminist contribution to the understanding of motherhood as a structuring category has been its insistence on a distinction between biological and social motherhood (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 165). Motherhood is sacred to patriarchal Western female identity. Simone de Beauvoir claimed that many women 'are made to see motherhood as the essence of their life and the fulfilment of their destiny' (de Beauvoir, 1953, p. 484) and motherhood (or lack of motherhood) continues to define adult femininity in one way or another in the West (Chick et. al., 2002, p.149; Eckes, 2002, p. 99).⁷ For many women,

⁷ This is also true elsewhere in the world: see for example Donkor and Sandall (2007, p. 1683) on Ghana and Remennick (2000, p. 821) on Israel.

failing to fulfil the societal obligation to reproduce undermines all other accomplishments, prompting hostility and revulsion by ‘going against nature’. This is shown in the *Alien* universe through, among other things, the characterisation of Dr. Elizabeth Shaw in *Prometheus* (2012).

Shaw struggles with the stigma and shame of involuntary childlessness (Whiteford & Gonzalez, 1995, p. 27), as can be seen in a painful exchange with her partner, Holloway. Holloway states: “There is nothing special about the creation of life! Right? Anybody can do it. All you need is a dash of DNA and half a brain”. Shaw retorts, “I can’t. I can’t create life. What does that say about me?” (Scott, *Prometheus*, 2012). Noticeably, Shaw and Holloway tacitly agree that their infertility is *her* problem: she says, “I can’t” rather than “we can’t”, and Holloway does not correct her. Shaw has completely internalized the patriarchal ideal of women as mothers, and being unable to fulfil that idea leads her to view herself as defective. Women struggling with infertility may commonly feel they are either ‘empty’ or ‘full of the wrong things’ (Pine, 2018, p. 39). Ironically, it is actually Holloway that is unwittingly gestating a deadly virus: he is ‘full of the wrong things’. The distress Shaw feels is normal (McQuillan et al., 2003, p. 1007) for women in 2019. However, the *Prometheus* leaves earth in 2091. This means that, in the *Alien* universe, humanity can travel to distant moons and create advanced synthetics, but still has not developed a treatment for infertility or learnt to see it as a shared burden within relationships.⁸ The future depicted here is thus just as patriarchal as our current world, with health issues and social burdens that impact women mere afterthoughts.

⁸ This is unsurprising if one considers the history of medical research, throughout which problems that impact men have been taken far more seriously than those that impact women (Holdcroft, 2007, p. 2). For example, preliminary studies have indicated that main ingredient in Viagra (sildenafil citrate) can alleviate moderate to severe menstrual cramps (Dmitrovic et al., 2013) (a condition that impacts many cis-women as well as other genders), but is instead marketed solely to cis-men for erectile dysfunction.

Fatherhood

Fathers in the *Alien* universe are often hurt or hated by their offspring, as in David's contempt for Peter Weyland, Holloway being burnt to death because of the monstrosity growing within him, or Amanda Ripley's conflict with her stepfather. As in *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818) the 'fathers' in the *Alien* universe are quickly punished by the natural world with disaster or death when they attempt to usurp the natural order of things. Interestingly, and again as in *Frankenstein* (1818) (the subtitle of which was 'The Modern Prometheus'), the majority of fathers depicted in *Prometheus* (2012), *Alien: Isolation* (2014) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017) are 'mad scientists', a term loaded with gendered implications. The majority of 'mad scientists share five characteristics: 1) masculinity, expressed through power and control; 2) over-reaching; 3) secrecy; 4) experimentation; and 5) magic (Jordanova, 1989, p. 125). I believe that if the mad scientist is also a father, an additional criterion might be added to this list: 6) a tendency to abandon his creation in order to pursue his own needs. The Engineer, Peter Weyland, and David all share these six qualities: they present as masculine; they hold power (financial, physical, or technological); they over-reach and suffer for it; they each have a hidden agenda that horrifies those around them; they experiment, with seemingly magical results, creating life, machines and traveling the stars; and they put themselves ahead of their offspring. Even David, who seemingly delights in his creations, does not mourn their deaths; rather, the final scene of *Alien: Covenant* (2017) shows David triumphantly 'birthing' xenomorph embryos from his mouth.⁹

The Engineers are 'mad scientists' who created humankind, but they are also deadbeat dads. In *Prometheus* (2012), the Engineers attempt to destroy one of their most problematic creations (humanity), using the biological weapon Chemical A0-3959X.91-15, which

⁹ In the commentary for *Alien: Covenant* (2017), Scott says that scene was inspired by a film about drug cartels in which people vomited up drugs and notes that David will utilize the 2,000 human embryos on the *Covenant* as a 'form of evolution' in his experiments.

ultimately destroys the Engineers themselves and thus might also be seen as the fury of the ‘natural’ world rebelling against disorder. This is an idea with a long history in horror texts, with (again) *Frankenstein* (1818) being the most prominent example. Another connection with *Frankenstein* (1818) occurs when the militant-variant Engineer is roused from its hyper-sleep, to be confronted by some of his ‘children’. The father Engineer reacts with anger and loathing, striking out and killing some of his offspring. The Engineers do not actively nourish, support or in any way parent their creations. Scott claimed that the Engineers want to exterminate humanity as an experiment that ‘went wrong’, noting that the Engineers believed humans to be a ‘bunch of children’ (Scott, 2017). To the modern ear, ‘children’ would be by definition a group that requires protection and guidance, but Scott seems to correlate the term with an infantile, squabbling mob that deserving abandonment or death.

If the original *Alien* (1979) drew its horror from the notion of a man giving birth organically and involuntarily, *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017) focus on an inorganic and voluntary birth that also turns into something horrifying: David’s relationship with Weyland. Weyland is a horrible father. The opening scene of *Alien: Covenant* shows Weyland introducing himself to David as his father, telling David to refer to him (Weyland) as father, creator and master and referring to David as his “creation” and “the closest thing to a son...but he has no soul”, expressing both the masculinity and power of the ‘mad scientist’, and the tendency to dismiss his children, as mentioned earlier. David is, in turn, a resentful, ‘difficult child’, asking, “Doesn’t everybody want their parents dead?” (*Prometheus*, 2012). Clearly, Scott perseverates upon, but does not transcend or question, Freudian influences here. An extended version of this scene (though not included in theatrical releases) shows that just before his death, Weyland has a brief conversation with his own ‘father’ and creator, the militant variant Engineer, relying on David to translate. Weyland points to David, stating “Do you see this man[?]...I made him in my own image, so that he would be perfect. You and I,

we are superior. We are creators. We are Gods. And Gods never die” (*Prometheus*, 2012).

This moment of ‘mad scientist’ overreach ends disastrously: the Engineer pats David’s head, then rips it off and bludgeons Weyland to death with it. Weyland’s death reveals him as both ‘mad scientist’ bad dad and a frightened old man. When asked about Weyland in *Alien Covenant* (2017) David says, “He was human. Entirely unworthy of his creation. I pitied him at the end” (*Alien: Covenant*, 2017). While it is unclear if David is referring to the “end” as his ‘death’ or Weyland’s own expiration, in David’s mind, the destruction of his creator did little but to cement David’s own supremacy over not only his parental figure, but humanity itself.

David is a synthetic, commissioned and built by Peter Weyland. He clearly resents being bound into subservience by beings that he considers inferior (he flat out says “I was not meant to serve” (*Alien: Covenant*, 2017)). Following in his father’s footsteps, David is also a ‘mad scientist’ and bad father. Throughout *Prometheus* (2012), David experiments with Chemical A0-3959X.91–15 as he sees fit, including putting it in Holloway’s drink. Damon Lindelof, the screenwriter of *Prometheus* (2012), claims that this is in response to David ‘ask[ing] Holloway, “What would you be willing to do to get the answers to your questions?” Holloway says, “Anything and everything”’ (Woerner, 2012). Flimsy ethics protocols are startlingly on brand for the ‘mad scientist’. David perseverates over being able to ‘create’ biological organisms through atypical biological methods, keeping several grotesque experiments on display and speaking poetically about them to Oram. The *mise-en-scène* also clearly signals David as a ‘mad scientist’, in the form of his recognisable ‘bad’ lab. As well as suggesting a lengthy process of experimentation, the repulsive biological samples floating for perpetuity in jars are an obvious piece of visual shorthand, suggesting a direct link with other, earlier ‘bad scientists’ such as Dr Frankenstein (Hindle, 1990), or Dr Jekyll (Stiles, 2009). The stereotype of the bad, mad, male scientist remains, in many ways unchanged,

working feverishly in a laboratory filled with bubbling liquids, tortured glassware and biological horrors. We might also think of certain film versions of *Frankenstein* (Whale, 1931) or *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Mamoulian, 1931) that nearly always gesture at the lab via a variety of non-specific scientific gizmos quietly bubbling away, changing colour or ‘doing science’ in a corner. The gender also persists: the mad scientist is persistently depicted as male (Haynes, 2016). In the director’s commentary for *Alien: Covenant*, Scott says that David’s ‘bestiary’ consists of abortions: failed experiments due to lack of human DNA (*Alien: Covenant*, 2017). The use of the old-fashioned term ‘bestiary’ is also telling, again gesturing at the long history of this trope. Later in the scene, after the reveal of the abortions, and just prior to a face-hugger attaching itself to an unwilling victim, Scott reiterates: ‘We’re going to see the birth here. Because he [David] creates them, in a funny way, he is the father’ (*Alien: Covenant*, 2017).

Science becoming more accessible to the general public (such as science documentary television programming) has begun to shift public expectations of what a real, modern laboratory might look like (Haynes, 2016), towards cleaner, sparer, brighter spaces. This is also reflected in *Alien: Covenant*: the lab *Covenant* biologist Karine Oram works in is brightly lit. Yet, the lighting (and the cleanliness we might infer from this clinical space) does not stop her from slipping on blood and falling to her own death. Though the lab projects modernity, competence and confidence, despite whatever horrors are occurring within it, the staff occupying it do not. Karine Oram is played by an actress who has a Scottish mother and Nigerian father. The coding of Black or WoC female scientist as clumsy, incompetent, or as someone who does not belong, has a long and shameful history in both the academic and scientific world (Gasman & Nguyen, 2019; Prescod-Weinstein, 2020). Black girls and women who are interested in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics are often isolated and dismissed, from secondary school to the laboratories themselves (Gasman &

Nguyen, 2019; Prescod-Weinstein, 2020). Karine Oram, in her well-lit, new laboratory, is another recent (fictional) iteration.

Known first-generation synthetics in the *Alien* world have all been created by men: Weyland and David/Walter, Michael Bishop and Heperdyne Systems 120-A/2 and 341-B, and Josiah Sieg and Seegson's (formerly Sieg and Sons) Working Joes. Sometimes these human men literally create synthetics 'in their own image': in the case of Michael Bishop, his creation, Heperdyne Systems 341-B, is modelled on his own appearance. Viewers know one of these as Lance Bishop in both *Aliens* (1986) and *Alien 3* (1992). Second-generation synthetics are created by machine and can also face discrimination: Ripley is horrified to find Bishop on her mission in *Aliens* (1986) and in *Prometheus* (2012), Holloway has an outright bias against synthetics. The actor who played Holloway, Logan Marshall-Green, said:

It's something I haven't seen in science fiction, which is a sense of racism or bigotry towards androids and synthetic life. I think synthetic life is inevitable, and along that line bigotry and racism (if you will) will be inevitable as well. Although I can't approach a role thinking of [my character] as a racist or a bigot, certainly now I can look back and explain his disdain for Michael [the actor who played David] in that way. I kind of loved it... that social reflection on a future being, a synthetic android. (Woerner, 2012)

As Walter tells David, the Weyland Corporation has stopped making such lifelike synthetics because it was unsettling to their human owners (*Alien: Covenant*, 2017). This phenomenon of feeling unsettled is known as 'the uncanny valley', in which humans experience feelings of eeriness and revulsion when androids, dolls or other objects resemble humans in many respects, but are not completely or convincingly realistic (MacDorman & Ishiguro, 2006). David, however, thinks that an artificial construction of life from an unnatural source is superior to life birthed/created by nature (and/or women, perhaps). He states, "I found perfection here. I've created it. A perfect organism" (*Alien: Covenant*, 2017). Ash, the synthetic from *Alien* (1979), also uses the phrase "a perfect organism" to describe the xenomorph. Notably, in the commentary for *Alien: Covenant* (2017), Scott says that, during

the film's final scenes, "David feels like a God here. Gods are artificial". Therefore, I hypothesize that the final incarnation of the xenomorph is ultimately intended to be birthed from David: by absorbing him, the neomorph will transform, gaining the biomechanical elements and dark, metallic shine of the xenomorph.

Maternal impressions and pregnancy

Birth scenes in the *Alien* universe also adhere to problematic and out-dated stereotypes surrounding mothers. *Prometheus* seemingly perpetuates archaic beliefs about 'maternal impressions', a theory that stems from various folkloric beliefs, emerging as an intellectual theory in the fifteenth century in humanistic texts from Florence, and remaining prominent in the eighteenth century (Mazzoni, 2002, p. 16). This concept posits that oddities in infants are a direct result of the thoughts, fears, desires or experiences of the mother during gestation, drawing on patriarchal suspicion and mistrust of female sexuality (Albrecht, 2005, p. 1059). This hinges on the belief that women's minds and bodies are highly susceptible to external events and influences, including supernatural ones. In the writings of Renaissance thinkers, maternal impressions are also related to the unity between mother and foetus, a metaphor for the unity of the world and the magic that governs the universe, connecting humans to the cosmos, and the body to the soul (Mazzoni, 2002, p. 16). Maternal impressions theory is also patriarchal:

Woman's monstrous inadequacy, her freakishness, results from being a woman, from having a womb, whether she bears children or she is unable to bear them . . . Inherently and essentially defective because women possess wombs, their reproductive power embodies the extraordinary potential to deform the human race by breeding monsters, and the entire category of the female embodies the difference that deforms. (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 34)

The freakish nature of the gestating female, with the alleged power to transform her infant, reduces the patriarchal power of the male seed and blames the mother for any defects in the

child. A prominent example of this in horror texts can be found in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), in which pregnant Rosemary craves meat, and consumes raw chicken liver as ominous music blasts, suggesting a link to the viewer between her baby and what she is eating.¹⁰ Echoing this well-known scene, the recent horror film *Raw* (Ducournau, 2016) includes the consumption of raw rabbit kidney as part of a hazing ritual at veterinary school, as a catalyst for the central character's obsessive cannibalism. It is also present in other mediums: the fictional grimdark (a subgenre of fantasy fiction that focuses on gritty, and often violent settings or characters) world of *Game of Thrones* (1996) features a female protagonist engaging in the ritualistic consumption of a horse's heart, in order to ensure the son that she is gestating will be fierce and physically strong (note again the association between raw, bloody meat and masculinity). Like the world of *Alien* (with the facehugger and hammerpede), the meat/masculinity enters the body through the mouth in a nasty bit of sexual imagery.

Shaw is certainly distressed during her pregnancy, agonising over whether or not Holloway's infection was sexually transmitted and traumatised by the possibility of various horrific deaths prior to the birth of her 'baby' trilobite. Just before the birth takes place, David tells Shaw that the result of her accelerated pregnancy is "not exactly a traditional foetus" and refuses to let her see the baby (*Prometheus*, 2012). By refusing to let Shaw make informed medical decisions, *Prometheus* falls into yet another horror trope: that 'father knows best' (and indeed 'doctor knows best') when it comes to taking care of women and girls who are sick or otherwise in danger. An early example can be found in another horror text, *Dracula* (1897), when Dr. Van Helsing comes to the aid of Lucy, placing garlic all over the room without explanation, while constantly reminding Lucy to obey him without

¹⁰ A similar superstition can be found in certain regions of Italy: if mothers do not respond to their pregnancy cravings for mozzarella, olives or salami, the belief is that their children will be struck down with unsightly birth marks (Mazzoni, 2002, p. 1).

question: “But hush! [...] We must obey, and silence is a part of obedience; and obedience is to bring you strong and well into loving arms that wait for you” (Stoker, 2003, p. 121).

Many women report being unheard by medical staff during medical consultations (Dusenbery, 2017). I have witnessed this during my own healthcare experiences. As mentioned earlier in the book, I received a diagnosis with a rare cancer, after being told repeatedly that my symptoms were typical PhD student ‘anxiety’. Additionally, after the invasive biopsy to diagnose my cancer (complete with a draining tube placed between my ribs, essentially ‘staking’ me), I was told by a medical professional that I asked “too many questions” about my treatment. As it turns out, my line of inquiry was completely justified; I was asking this healthcare provider why I was still in so much pain and it subsequently turned out that they had forgotten to dispense the pain relief. This error was not caught until after I had vomited on myself from the pain prior to a morning x-ray (and before morning meds were distributed). Similarly, Shrewsbury and Telford hospitals (SaTH) were recently at the centre of a damning scandal regarding their inability to provide adequate maternity care. A National Health Service report found the hospital culpable in the deaths of and harming of mothers and babies from 2000-2019 (Weaver, 2020). Among the failures in care were a tendency to blame mothers for their complications, as well as ignoring mothers who knew something was wrong. One mother reported that SaTH assured her that her son’s heartbeat was normal during her labour, when in fact her son’s heart rate was severely elevated, leading to a myocardial infarction during his mother’s labour, and his death eleven hours after he was born (Weaver, 2020). Studies have shown that even in medical consultations, medical students did not behave in a gender-neutral way: there is a powerful interaction between a student's gender and a patient's gender. The same can be said of race. For example, Black women and WoC in the United States receive particularly bad care when giving birth in the United States (Vedam et al., 2019); similarly, in European countries African refugees

experience prejudice, indifference to their pain and an assumption that WoC are somehow ‘closer to nature’ and therefore do not require or desire medical intervention (Quagliariello, 2019). Female medical students are more patient-centred than male, and it was also shown that the female student-female patient dyad had significantly greater ‘patient-care’ value than the male student-male patient dyad (Zaharias, 2004, p. 148). Lucy and Elizabeth Shaw do not have the option of asking for advice or are from female medical providers; the female medic of the *Prometheus*, Ford, is noticeably absent during any pregnancy-related scene. As Lucy gets ready for bed, Dr Van Helsing prepares his final baffling warning:

[W]hen [Lucy] was in bed he (Van Helsing) came and fixed the wreath of garlic round her neck. The last words he said to her were--
‘Take care you do not disturb it; and even if the room feel close, do not tonight open the window or the door’. (Stoker, 2003, p. 122)

Mrs. Westenra ignores the non-specific warnings of the paternal figure: she removes the garlic and opens the window to let in both fresh air and Dracula. Rather than take responsibility for failing to explain *why* the garlic and closed windows were important or acknowledging that he removed the agency of the two women in so doing, Van Helsing laments: “This poor mother, all unknowing, and all for the best as she think, does such thing as lose her daughter body and soul” (Stoker, 2003, p. 417). The narratives of both David and Van Helsing suggest over and over that ‘doctor/father knows best’ and that women cannot be trusted with decisions, including those around their own bodies: a real-life horror to women fighting for bodily autonomy around the globe (DiGioia, 2017, p. 55), and particularly around abortion. For example, 40% of women of childbearing age live in countries where abortions are highly restricted or illegal (World Health Organization, 2012) and the criminalisation of women’s bodies is a patriarchal cornerstone (Chesney-Lind, 2017). Additionally, gistorically, the juvenile justice court of the United States has policed what was framed as the sexual immorality of young female defendants (Pasko, 2017; Shadrack, 2021). A survey of policing practices and policies at thirty-six law enforcement agencies in the United States showed that

Black women in the LGBTQIA+ community were often on the receiving end of police officer's homophobic and transphobic abuse (Ritchie & Jones-Brown, 2017). The Irish State, in collusion with the Roman Catholic Church, was directly involved in draconian policing of women and girls' sexuality (Quinlan, 2017). Ireland's Magdalene homes 'incarcerated and exploited young women essentially for being sexually active, and getting pregnant while not married while also exporting babies for money' (Chesney-Lind, 2017, p. 2). Even just these few examples from Western countries soundly refute the xenophobic belief that the West treats women and girls well, while the impoverished world (with a special emphasis on the Islamic World) treats women and girls horrendously (Chesney-Lind, 2017). Moreover, it also shows the failure of the West (and Western medical establishments in particular) to care for women and girls of all ethnicities.

Like Van Helsing, David is a bombastic windbag who fails to inform, respect or save the woman in his care. David gives Shaw advice on how to operate the pod, as well as factual, medical statements about her pregnancy (even though she is already well aware that something is seriously wrong). The fact that the 'baby' trilobite, born of a woman, attacks, subdues (and as an added bonus, impregnates) a homicidal Engineer, allowing both its mother (Elizabeth), spiritual father (David), and arguably, all of humanity, to escape extermination, solidifies Lindelof's reliance on patriarchal tropes. What is born from a woman is inherently 'good', although it may appear monstrous: the non-sentient parasitic trilobite saves the day, as opposed to the inherently destructive creations of David and, even when humanity is excluded, the Engineers. Dr Shaw's life is ultimately saved (unwittingly, but saved nonetheless) by her monstrous abortion, and it is the impregnation of the Engineer by Dr Shaw's 'child' that creates the protomorph, rewarding her for carrying an unwanted pregnancy ("I want it out of me") to term. Thus, in comparison to *Alien* (1979), *Prometheus*

(2012) is yet another a missed opportunity to move towards gender equality.

Birth and death

Lindelof calls the Engineers, Peter Weyland, and David ‘creators’, usurping a traditional female role and again aligning these ‘bad dads’ with the stereotypical mad scientist:

I think hardwired into the original *Alien* is this idea of fertility. This idea of, for lack of a better way of looking at it, the sperm and the egg need each other in order to form a new life. And in this gestational construct, the human being is the egg and the sperm is represented (in the original *Alien*) by a face-hugger. And in *Prometheus* it's represented in a different way. I just feel like the idea of taking these three generations of creators (so the Engineers who created us, then us, and our creation synthetic human beings the robot David), we're going to take those three generations, we're going to lock them in a room together, we're going to watch them have sex with each other. And then we're going to see what comes out. That was the experiment that *Prometheus* was running. (Woerner, 2012)

The fertility-based experiment of *Prometheus* is a failure. In fact, every creation of a mad scientist father in the *Alien* (1979) universe is a disaster. Two of the fathers named above are destroyed by the very force (or ‘child’) they created and then attempted to tame or mould in their own image. Additionally, Lindelof contradicts himself: while the original *Alien* (1979) undoubtedly centres around an idea of fertility, in *Alien* (1979) this is a little more nuanced than the sperm (face-hugger)¹¹ and egg (human). Only one human is impregnated by a face-hugger in *Alien* (1979), and that human was a man, a deliberate choice made by *Alien* (1979) screenwriter David O'Bannon. O'Bannon famously stated: “I'm not going to go after the women in the audience. I'm going to attack the men. I am going to put in every image I can think of to make the men in the audience cross their legs” (Zacky, 2002). Getting the men in the audience to “cross their legs”, even though it has just been established that the face-hugger does not enter the body through the genitals, clearly further defines this moment as a rape metaphor. Additionally, while men's fears of pregnancy and childbirth are primordial (Miles, 2001), the fact that O'Bannon wanted to discomfit the *male* viewers is arguably a

¹¹ The ‘face-hugger’ is a parasitoid, as well as being the second stage in the life cycle of a xenomorph. Face-huggers are entirely focused on making contact with a host's mouth, so that the embryonic form of the xenomorph can be implanted into the host and can be seen as a metaphor for oral rape, which also could be read as a link to the vagina dentata.

subversion of the ‘woman-as-victim’ (Masser et al., 2010) stereotype.

Lindelof departed from O’Bannon’s original intention to not “go after women in the audience” when thinking about fertility during the writing of *Prometheus* (2012): while men are attacked and penetrated by various alien creatures, Dr. Elizabeth Shaw’s birth scene is a conglomerate of trauma seemingly directed at viewers who identify as women. Shaw gives birth to a monster as a result of bad dad/mad scientist David’s meddling. Shaw is repulsed (“I want to see it. I want it out of me” (*Prometheus*, 2012)) and scenes prior to the birth show her in pain, with an undulating stomach. She is then torn apart during the birth. This is a graphic and visceral horror film take on birth, ending with a screaming, tentacled new-born.¹²

Alien: Covenant (2017) stands in contrast to O’Bannon’s original credo of discomfiting men. The *Covenant* itself is a colonization vessel, carrying human embryos within it like a giant womb. One of the first shots on the *Covenant* is of a male synthetic, Walter (who looks identical to David), sorting through deficient embryos and placing them in a bio-hazard bucket: another ‘father knows best’ trope, as well as a view of masculine power over feminine creation. As in *Alien* (1979), there are several, violent male births: two ‘pregnancies’ are caused by mould-like spores, while others are via the face-hugger route. One character (Ledward) ‘births’ a neomorph through his spine; another, Hallet, is killed via a neomorph tearing through his throat. Others (Oram and Lopé) are killed via the traditional *Alien* universe method: face-hugger implantation, then chest-burster ‘birth’.

Scott talks in detail about Oram’s death, which is notable because David leads him to it. Unsurprisingly, Oram’s death becomes an experiment: David leads Oram to an assortment of ovomorphs (eggs), tells Oram that the eggs are waiting for ‘mother’ and then tricks Oram into peering into an ovomorph, which causes a face-hugger to leap out at him. Scott explains in commentary that “saying ‘mother’ makes him [Oram] feel safer. He does not realize he’s

¹² Of course, real-life birth is often a traumatic experience for many women (amplified by poor support from health practitioners post-birth) (Ford & Ayers, 2011, p. 1553).

about to *be* the mother” (*Alien: Covenant*, 2017). All of this subversion with male births in *Alien: Covenant* (2017) (as well as interracial and gay married couples, which shows that maybe the future is not completely horrible) is not undone by David’s triumph in the end: a triumph marked by a non-fatal male birth.

Patriarchy and ‘other’ mothers

I argue that *Alien: Covenant* cannot be viewed as a feminist text or a subversion of patriarchy because of how women are treated within it, including, but not limited to, Dr Elizabeth Shaw and Daniels. In *Alien: Covenant* (2017), Shaw’s fate is revealed, appearing only as a hologram and a corpse in this film. She was murdered, mutated, dissected and displayed by David in his alien study room (linking to yet another horror trope of ritual murder and dissection (Bradley, 1995)), and her DNA utilised in yet more experiments, cruelly creating life in death (“I can’t create life”). Shaw survived the death of her beloved partner and Captain; the realisation that there is no God; a horrific pregnancy and birth; and the stress of literally putting David’s shattered body back together after it was torn to pieces by the Engineer. This reconstruction is similar to a Finnish legend, in which the hero Lemminkäinen is killed, dismembered, and thrown into the river Tuoni (in the Underworld) after hunting the swan of Tuonela. Lemminkäinen's Mother – she has no name of her own – travels the earth in search of her son, before travelling to the underworld and discovering his remains. Lemminkäinen's Mother drags him out of the river, piece by piece, and sews him back together, before successfully gathering the materials to resurrect Lemminkäinen. Lemminkäinen's Mother and her living son then travel home together, with Lemminkäinen's Mother living (and consistently dispensing accurate, wise advice) until the end of the legend. In contrast, Dr Shaw is rewarded for her efforts in resurrecting David by being killed and experimented on. Similarly, Daniels survives seeing her partner burn to death in front of her,

as she pounds helplessly on his malfunctioning cryotube: another womb metaphor. Here, the womb is a source of both death and obstacle. Daniels and her opinions are then completely disregarded by the new captain, Oram. Daniels battles both aliens and David, and the final shot is of Daniels realizing that the person she believes to be Walter is in fact David, who tells her that he'll put the children to bed. Daniels thinks he is referring to human embryos, when David is in fact probably talking about the face-hugger embryos stowed away in his belly. David then forcibly puts Daniels into cryosleep as she realises the danger she is in, in a scene reminiscent of a date rape, or a sexual assault made under anaesthesia. Daniels, a triumphant heroine, is reduced to a sobbing, scared mess at the hands of a perverse 'mad scientist' bad dad.

This is further compounded by the violent deaths of other women: for example, Upworth, who is impaled upon a prehensile, phallic protomorph tail after showing her breasts in what begins as a shower sex scene and ends as a graphic, sexualised death scene. Previously, Upworth turned to her husband for approval prior to issuing an override command on the ship: under patriarchy, women cannot make professional decisions without spousal approval. As already discussed with reference to Lucy Westenra and Karine Oram, the theme of female helplessness and incompetence is pervasive. For example, the pilot Faris cannot keep a cool head in a crisis even though surely a pilot would be trained and required to do so. Instead, she misses multiple opportunities to kill the neomorph and blows up the ship they are on by accident (in contrast, her husband Tennessee contributes to the vanquishing of two protomorphs). Ferro, the female pilot in *Aliens* (1986), remains calm but failed to reach her gun in time; as already mentioned, another female crew member on the *Covenant*, Karine, slips over in her own med-bay before she is torn to pieces by a neomorph; and finally Rosenthal is beheaded by a neomorph (but not before flashing some cleavage), again after failing to reach her gun in time. The long, lingering shots of nude or otherwise

sexualised female bodies in *Alien: Covenant* (2017) do a disservice to the feminist roots of the series, falling back onto stale patriarchal tropes of the horrors, flaws and sexual allure of the female body.

Alien creatures can also be ‘othered’ mothers, therefore. Both the xenomorph and hammerpede are archaic mothers, made abject by slimy eggs and various bodily fluids. I focus on the hammerpede here because I was able to interview an individual who worked on creating this creature, on the condition that they remain anonymous. Discussing *Prometheus*, the interviewee told me “I mean, the whole film is about sex in a way. Like, it’s all about creation, which is pretty much birth, so in a way I think sex and creation are the main themes” (A, 2018). Looking at this interview in hindsight, I find it interesting that my participant conflates birth and sex. For me, as I struggle with the spectre of infertility due to my chemotherapy treatment, *Promethesus* conflates birth with death. Sex and birth are separated out in many ways in the *Alien* universe, as in *Prometheus* itself (for example, we see the childless Dr Shaw having sex with her partner, which both audience and characters know is unlikely to result in a pregnancy). This simple explanation offered by my interviewee belies the complexity of what is occurring. My participant recalled those in charge of the project wanting “something that had some sexual undertones”, and noted that the hammerpede “looks both like a penis (when it’s closed) and like a vagina (when it opens its head like a cobra)” (A, 2018). At one point, a hammerpede’s head is cut off and the organism rapidly grows a new one. This was a conscious design choice, to make the hammerpede more phallic. My interviewee notes:

I also made the new head of the hammerpede grow like a penis coming out of the foreskin. I was partially in charge of that effect, they actually made me do some things to make it (the head regrowth) look less like a penis. Some earlier versions of the design looked even more like a vagina, with teeth. (A, 2018)

Based on existing scholarship (Creed, 1993), what my interviewee has told me, and my own opinions regarding ‘the archaic mother’, I think that the hammerpede in *Prometheus* follows in the tradition of archaic mother xenomorph. However, childbirth and motherhood are also sources of horror, representing male fears of female bodies in general; men fear the female body because often they do not understand it. All mothers in the *Alien* universe, whether human or alien, are shown to be monstrous.

Finally, there is extensive scholarship and feminist analysis surrounding Ellen Ripley (Creed, 1993), including on motherhood (Bundtzen, 1987; Scobie, 1993; Yunis & Ostrander, 2003; Zwinger, 1992). Here, I focus on Ripley’s relationship with her daughter Amanda, explored in both real and alternative writings of *Aliens* (1986) and *Alien: Isolation* (2014). Ripley continually sacrifices herself for others, whether it is her hair, her personal safety or her life that must be risked or given up. In the case of Newt, she makes these sacrifices specifically for a child. Any triumph or relative safety is fleeting: the xenomorphs always return. We might see this as a metaphor for how mothers sacrifice parts of their lives, such as a professional existence (assuming women are permitted to work at all), but it also brings to mind a line inspired by *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), uttered by David in *Prometheus* (2012): “Sometimes to create, one must first destroy”.

Absent and avenging mothers

In the director’s cut of *Aliens* (1986), Ripley weeps at hearing that her daughter has died from cancer while she was in stasis, recalling how she had promised Amanda she would be home for her eleventh birthday. The prevalence of cancer in the world of *Alien* can also be a birth or internal growth metaphor: a cancer consists of many cells that grow and divide more quickly than non-cancerous cells (Hu & Fu, 2013). Burke, the junior Weyland-Yutani executive, unsympathetically replies, “Some promises you just can’t keep” (Cameron, 1986).

Interestingly, the original script for *Aliens* features a different conclusion to Ellen and Amanda Ripley's story: Amanda is an unnamed woman, alive, but with a physical disability due to an unknown injury. During a vid-phone conversation, she tells her mother that she blames her for being gone and hates her for it, before ending the call. This might remind us of maternal impression, as discussed earlier, or the broader notion of 'mother-blame'. In many modern Western societies, mothers are held responsible for the behaviour and outcomes of their children and thereby for the health of entire families, future citizens and nations (Blum, 2007, p. 202). Historically, 'bad mothers' have been blamed for everything from crime, the Communist menace and delinquency to schizophrenia (Blum, 2007, p. 203). Today, mothers of children with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties (or invisible disabilities) face unique challenges. Mothers are held to be the proximal causes of their children's afflictions if they do not make 'unrelenting efforts' in raising them (Blum, 2007, p. 203). Cameron shuns cultural norms surrounding motherhood by resisting this, though this will not prevent judgemental audience members blaming Ripley for Amanda's woes.

Amanda is destined to have many woes (including a childhood of brushes with the law and running away from home). The lack of explanation for her mother's disappearance prompts Amanda to work in the sector where the *Nostramo* vanished and in *Alien: Isolation* (2014) she finds out that the flight recorder of the *Nostramo* (the commercial towing vehicle that her mother worked on in *Alien* (1979)) is being held at Sevastopol Station, a space station owned and operated by the Seegson Corporation. The Weyland-Yutani executive that tells Amanda this offers her a place on the mission to retrieve the flight recorder, which she readily accepts. On the Sevastopol Station, Amanda survives the resurgence of childhood trauma, the collapse of civil society on the space station, xenomorphs, and rogue, murderous synthetics. Throughout, she continues to make concerted efforts to find her mother: early in the game, Amanda discovers the black box recorder from the *Nostramo*, and this becomes the

primary plot mover of *Alien: Isolation*. Of course, a video game would not be a video game without challenges. The *Nostramo* black box is empty except for a few corrupted files, and in her attempts to decrypt and listen to these files, Amanda risks multiple forms of death: murder, xenomorph, synthetic or industrial accident. Towards the end of the game, Amanda finds a message from her mother, in which Ellen Ripley calls Amanda a ‘sweetheart’, explains what happened to her and ends the message by telling Amanda that she loves her. Many cultures feature myths with horror elements that indicate the power of maternal love. For example, as already mentioned, Lemminkäinen's Mother¹³ is able to travel the world and the heavens looking for her dead son, before going to the underworld, dredging the dismembered body of her son from the river and sewing it together by hand (much as Shaw does with David). He is then resurrected, with help from a magic bee and honey from the gods (Lönnrot, 2008). Bees and the various evolutionary incarnations of the xenomorph are both powerful symbols of motherhood: every bee in a hive, and ultimately the majority of xenomorphs, comes from the same mother/queen. In the case of *Alien: Isolation* (2014), we see a daughter looking for a mother rather than a mother looking for her son, but the power of maternal love as a supernatural balm, and the continual emotional labour and sacrifice required of mothers, continue to motivate and protect.

Scholars have justifiable doubts as to whether the earlier films in the *Alien* franchise were truly feminist. Those who oppose the feminist narrative surrounding these films focus on Ripley as a projection of male fantasies (Clover, 1987). As established, the depictions of motherhood in the original films are far from revolutionary, rewarding ‘good’ mothers, and punishing ‘bad’ mothers (Zwinger, 1992). Understanding that, those films held the promise of at least suggesting change and a more woman-centred future. The focus by special effects

¹³ Much like Grendel’s mother in *Beowulf*, she does not have her own name.

artists involved in the film on scaring the men in the audience is arguably a subversion of the ‘woman-as-victim’ (Masser et al., 2010) trope. *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017) destroy any potential for subversion in that regard, by focusing on scaring women in the audience, through their violent depictions of giving birth and Shaw’s infertility struggles. These films built upon the ‘mad scientist bad-dad’ (Jordanova, 1989) archetype, adding the tendency to abandon their creations in order to pursue their own selfish needs, caring little for their offspring and rejecting the maternal sacrifices outlined above.

This chapter has argued that *Prometheus* (2012), *Alien: Covenant* (2017) and *Alien: Isolation* (2014) appear to occur in a futuristic world in which old issues surrounding patriarchy and motherhood linger. Furthermore, *Prometheus*, *Alien: Covenant*, and *Alien: Isolation* have the additional unifying theme of the horror and perversion of male creation, caused by ‘mad scientists’ who are also bad dads. As feminists and gender studies scholars further their study of the *Alien* universe, it is clear that motherhood, fatherhood, and childbirth are such common themes within these films because they reflect overarching patriarchal fears of feminine creative and sexual power of reproduction.

Chapter 4. “You've never seen a miracle”: Birth and Parenthood in *Blade Runner 2049*

This chapter will focus on birth and parenthood in *Blade Runner 2049*, which revolves around the events stemming from a synthetic replicant giving birth. The replicant mother, Rachael, is dead and absent for the majority of *Blade Runner 2049*, connecting to previous work done on the absent/missing mother trope (Åström, 2015; Hoffman, 2020). In the film universe, this birth is viewed as either monstrous abomination (“She was a replicant. Pregnant. This breaks the world, K. Do you know what that means?” (*Blade Runner 2049*, 2017)) by those involved with law and order in this future society, or miraculous (“You newer models are happy scraping the shit... because you've never seen a miracle” (*Blade Runner 2049*, 2017)) on the fringes of society, or who are subjugated by those in power.

“This breaks the world.”

Notably, the individual with the most power and privilege within *Blade Runner 2049*, Niander Wallace, is, at first glance a ‘bad dad’ mad scientist (a notion outlined earlier), who perversely uses birth as a means to achieve his own goals, which are: 1) to prove his supremacy over Tyrell (as Tyrell’s replicants reproduce naturally, and Wallace’s cannot); 2) to use reproduction in replicants to support interstellar colonisation;¹ and 3) profit. Wallace could easily round out a trinity of ‘bad dad’ mad scientists in the *Blade Runner* and *Alien* universe, alongside Weyland and Tyrell. However, I argue that Wallace goes beyond Tyrell or Weyland, and achieves what they could not: godhood, through various connections with the historic Odin Allfather, a god in the Norse canon. This also connects to previous work on male science fiction creators emulating characters from classic myth (Alvares & Salzman-

¹ “That barren pasture. Empty, and salted. The dead space between the stars. Right here. And this is the seed that we must change for Heaven. I cannot breed them. So help me, I have tried. We need more Replicants than can ever be assembled. Millions, so we can be trillions more. We could storm Eden and retake her” (*Blade Runner 2049*).

Mitchell, 2019). Moreover, Odin is a deity whose real-world contemporary disciples include white supremacist groups (such as Odins Änglar (Odin's Angels) (Löow, 1995)). This further connects to issues surrounding whiteness in *Blade Runner 2049* (Chan, 2020), as touched on in the previous chapter. Meanwhile, the relationship between Deckard and his daughter is heavily framed by the 'dead/absent' mother trope: only through the removal of an avatar of Rachael can Deckard finally meet and bond with his adult daughter. This chapter will briefly touch upon academic works focused on *Blade Runner 2049* (Murphy, 2020; Vint, 2020), which, in turn, touch on scientific research into artificial wombs (Bullelli et al., 2011; Gelfand & Shook, 2006; Simonstein, 2006), robo-ethics (Siciliano and Khatib, 2016; Veruggio, Operto & Bekey, 2016), and robots bearing and raising children (Andries et al., 2018; Batliner et al., 2004; Beran et al., 2011; Robins et al., 2005).

Artificial wombs do not necessarily have to be housed in sentient replicants. For instance, scientists have created a stand-alone artificial womb, in which premature lambs were gestated for four weeks until they could be birthed safely (Davis, 2019). The ultimate goal of this technology is to make the artificial womb advanced enough for very premature infants to be placed inside it, until they are developmentally ready to enter the world (the prognosis for very premature infants is currently very poor: death and severe disabilities are likely) (Davis, 2019). Women unable or unlikely to have safe pregnancies (of which I am one), could, hypothetically, utilise one of these artificial wombs in the future (Davis, 2019). Academics have discussed the implications of this technology for both the human race as a whole and women within that larger group. Much of the debate surrounding the legal implications of artificial wombs centres around abortion rights (Cohen, 2017; Son, 2005) and how an artificial womb might change a state's ability to regulate pregnancy under existing laws (Cohen, 2017). The future intersection of abortion, artificial wombs and paternal rights has also been discussed (Cohen, 2017; Davis, 2019). Scholars note that abortion rights have

typically been defended as a right not to be a gestational parent, as opposed to a legal or genetic parent (Cohen, 2017; Son, 2005; Thomson, 1976). In theory, a woman utilising an artificial womb to gestate her biological foetus would give up that privilege (this is reflected in the rulings of court cases surrounding extra-corporeal frozen embryos) (Davis, 2019).

What if women could not access artificial wombs at all, but corporations could? It can be argued that what we are being shown in *Blade Runner 2049* is the future power of patriarchy over reproduction.

Ethical issues regarding service robots and artificial intelligence are part of contemporary philosophical discussion and debate. Some of these ethical concerns are focused on the private sector, and include military or sexual uses of robots (Belk, 2020). Other studies have noted that robo-ethics raises research opportunities in the categories of privacy, dehumanization, social deprivation and disempowerment (Čaić et al., 2019). Some existing humanoid robots are known to have gender (Said, 2003), although how this would play out on a mass scale is unknown. Robo-ethics also focuses on power relationships (Rodin, 2019). Fictional human-robot hierarchies (with humans at the top and robots on the bottom) lead to robot revolts focused on exterminating the human race, not only in *Blade Runner*, but also the *Terminator* series, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and many other fictional worlds. However, in lieu of complete human annihilation, some contemporary scholars and science fiction writers suggest that robots could, in theory, be the catalyst of a proletariat revolution that disrupts humanity entirely (Brin et al., 2013; Rodin, 2019). While there is a revolutionary replicant in *Blade Runner 2049* who seeks to free her people from slavery, this thread ultimately leads nowhere, squandering revolutionary potential (as other scholars have noted) (Murphy, 2020). Ultimately, the robo-ethics in *Blade Runner 2049* centre around forced robot pregnancy, and forced robot birth into slavery, something that has parallels with modern day incel ideals (see below). Female robots developed only to bear

and raise children certainly strengthens one academic argument surrounding humanoid robots and the post-human family, that ‘new bio- and robot technologies are being deployed to reify old or ‘traditional’ values, such as the patriarchal extended family and sociopolitical conservatism’ (Robertson, 2007, p. 37).

Miracle Workers, Deadly as Sin: Motherhood in Blade Runner 2049

The birth of Ana Stelline (the daughter of Rachael and Deckard) is arguably one of the most significant plot points of *Blade Runner 2049*. As other scholars note, her ‘ontological status is never entirely clear’ (Murphy, 2020, p. 103). This is partially due to the ambiguity around whether Deckard is a replicant (something that Scott insists upon, but that Ford, the actor who plays Deckard, denies) (de Lauzirik, 2007). This is further confounded by the language that Wallace uses, implying that Deckard is a replicant enslaved by his programming. He then undermines this statement (“That is, if you were designed” (*Blade Runner 2049*, 2017)). Therefore, Dr. Stelline is simultaneously perceived as a threat that needs to be eliminated to maintain societal order, a marvel that replicants can rally around to free themselves, and a potentially lucrative model of replicant (Murphy, 2020).

Rachael does not have a large role in *Blade Runner 2049*, which as Murphy notes, is marked ‘by Rachael’s almost total absence, a strange turn of events considering the plot revolves entirely around her actions’ (Murphy, 2020, p. 99). Rachael died during giving birth to Ana, sacrificing herself so that her child could live. The ‘Rachael’ in *Blade Runner 2049* is a replicant, created by Wallace to seduce Deckard into spilling any information he has on his child, or the accomplices that assisted him in hiding her. This fails and the pseudo-Rachael is subsequently shot in the head by Luv. In Vint’s article on vitality and reproduction in *Blade Runner 2049*, Rachael is not analysed at all (although Wallace, Deckard, and to some extent, K, are) (Vint, 2020). Even in academic studies specifically on reproduction in *Blade Runner*

2049, Rachael, the one replicant who could reproduce, is erased.

Rachael is constantly dehumanised in *Blade Runner 2049*: her replicant status is constantly mentioned, her bones are shown, her disembodied voice is heard via audio clips from the original *Blade Runner*, and she is seen (but not heard) in one brief silent clip. In comparison, Deckard is one of the emotional focal points of the film. Deckard's relationships (or lack thereof) with K and his daughter are very human, and drive the plot of *Blade Runner 2049*. The dehumanisation of Rachael is not limited to cyberpunk fantasy: issues surrounding the humanisation of birth exist in our own world:

Humanizing birth means understanding that the woman giving birth is a human being, not a machine and not just a container for making babies... respecting the woman as an important and valuable human being and making certain that the woman's experience while giving birth is fulfilling and empowering is not just a nice extra, it is entirely absolutely essential as it makes the woman strong and therefore makes society strong. (Wagner, 2001, p. S25)

Having the audience process Rachael's death twice (once off-screen via a botched c-section, and then again when the replica is shot onscreen) suggests, at least by Wagner's standards, that the society depicted in *Blade Runner 2049* is far from strong.

A dead or absent mother is not uncommon. One of the most significant ways in which a fictional mother can be erased or devalued is via her death or absence (Åström, 2015). This ties to earlier feminist theories surrounding the 'symbolic annihilation' (Tuchman, 1978, p. 8) of women in mass media. This term was originally used to describe how the US media belittled, denounced or simply ignored women (Tuchman, 1978). Åström uses 'symbolic annihilation' in her analysis of fictional texts, describing how 'mothers are routinely removed from narratives, through the re-circulation of a set of themes and clichés, forming a very resilient trope of the dead/absent mother' (Åström, 2015, p. 594). The 'dead/absent mother' trope is multifaceted, and some elements of it can be considered contradictory. In some texts, the absent/dead mother is a temporary setback that negatively impacts the character's birth but is subsequently overcome. In other stories, the mother's

absence can cause the child to grow closer to their father, forging ‘a deeper emotional attachment than they previously had, suggesting that the mother is an obstacle they need to overcome’ (Åström, 2015, p. 594). This arguably occurs in *Blade Runner 2049*: it is only after the replica Rachael is gunned down that Deckard finally speaks to his daughter. Other narratives show the mother as a direct threat to her child’s emotional or physical well-being. The majority of depictions of this trope reinforce the notion that the mother-child bond must be broken (Åström, 2015).

Deckard and the world of *Blade Runner* also arguably align with other science fiction worlds whose features include a dearth of nurturing father figures, a notable lack of healing sciences, and musings on men and gods. Lavoie’s work on ‘the lost and found Father’ trope in science fiction shows that in at least two instances (*Gregor the Overlander* (2003) and *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962)), science fiction texts ‘celebrate the rightness of the truth of science while manipulating and politicizing the character of the scientist who leaves his family’ (Lavoie, 2015, p. 66). These stories have very different moral centres: *Gregor the Overlander* (2003) argues that fathers, whether human or divine, are not omnipotent, while *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) features a scientist that believes God is both divine and the creator of life (Lavoie, 2015). Regardless of theology, fathers in both stories are linked with intelligence and courage, depicted as ‘good men who have resisted evil’ (Lavoie, 2015, p. 73).

Deckard is not a scientist, but *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049* are very much in the world of science fiction. Deckard also shares features with other science fiction fathers that show he is worthy of analysis through this lens, and that his characterisation in *2049* adheres to this trope. While Deckard is a rapist, there is no doubt both *Blade Runner* films frame Deckard as the ‘good guy’ or hero nevertheless. When viewers first see Deckard, he promptly shoots K (causing K to fall off a balcony) when K informs Deckard that he has questions: Deckard doesn’t even consider the possibility that K may be there to help. After

being in his self-imposed prison for decades, Deckard can easily be described, much like the fathers Lavoie studies, as ‘suffering from variations of prison-induced myopia’ (Lavoie, 2015, p. 73). By meeting his daughter at the end of the film (and remaining relatively unscathed), Deckard’s suffering (his isolation from his family, society, and the death of his wife, and other various extents of his trauma) is redeemed (much like the father in *A Wrinkle in Time* (Lavoie, 2015)). Meanwhile, Rachael is still dead. This further reinforces the fact that the portrayal of fatherhood in *2049* is not subversive either, and instead adheres to various science fiction tropes.

Some academics claim that the symbolic or actual death of a mother is a necessity from a psychological perspective, arguing that only through the mother’s death can the protagonist break a potentially destructive bond and create their own identity (Anolik, 2007). Understanding that, the majority of academic analysis surrounding the dead/absent mother trope indicate that it is a result of a fundamental ‘general anxiety of female influence’ (Henneberg, 2010, p. 126). The death of a mother is often used as a starting point of an adventure (Åström, 2015). I have discussed how mothers and their self-sacrifice are erased in other narratives, such as the original version (and modern retellings) of myths about Lemminkäinen's Mother from *The Kalevala* (DiGioia, 2020). While Lemminkäinen's Mother undergoes many troubles to resurrect her son, she is never given a name and, in *The Kalevala*, (1835) is left behind as the story continues without her. Lemminkäinen ignores her advice, resulting in his enemies burning several houses (including hers) to the ground while he is away (his mother survives by hiding in the woods). The ‘mother’s death as a precursor to adventure’ aspect of the dead/absent mother trope was utilised in science fiction well before *Blade Runner 2049*. For instance, the death of Padmé Amidala is what leads her children, Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa, to undertake myriad of exploits in the *Star Wars* universe (2005); in turn, the death of Leia is what prompts her son Ben to redeem himself, and what

prompts her pseudo-daughter Rey to take the surname Skywalker, starting a new chapter of her own journey. Murphy acknowledges this, writing that ‘distressingly, 2049 is organised around repeatedly sacrificing Rachael’ (Murphy, 2020, p. 99), but does not discuss how this makes a ‘miracle’ birth completely ordinary. There is nothing subversive or unusual about a mother, and her sacrifice, being completely erased from a narrative, even though her actions simultaneously drive the plot.

Allfathers and Bad Fathers: Fatherhood in Blade Runner 2049

One of the main antagonists of *Blade Runner 2049* is Niander Wallace: scientist, technologist, replicant manufacturer and CEO of the Wallace Corporation. Academic literature currently connects Wallace to capitalism, gender, and reproduction (Flisfeder, 2020; Murphy, 2020; Vint, 2020). In discussing cyberpunk’s masculinist legacy in *Blade Runner 2049*, Murphy misses a prime opportunity to compare *Blade Runner 2049* to another recent incarnation of a patriarchal futuristic world, created by Ridley Scott: *Prometheus* (set in 2091). While the debate over whether the *Alien* universe is cyberpunk or biopunk rages on, several academic studies on cyberpunk have included *Alien* (1979), occasionally alongside *Blade Runner* (Csicsery-Ronay, 1988; Edwards, 1994). Scott himself notes the connection between the universes of *Blade Runner* and *Alien*. One article quotes Scott from a *Blade Runner* director’s commentary, in which he says:

So almost this world [*Blade Runner*] could easily be the city that supports the crew that go out in *Alien*. So, in other words, when the crew of *Alien* come back in, they might go into this place and go into a bar off the street near where Deckard lives. That’s how I thought about it. (Scott, quoted in Crow, 2017)

Clearly the connection between the universes is strong enough that Ridley Scott can imagine characters from *Blade Runner* and *Alien* congregating at the same bar and the Special Edition Blu-Ray of *Prometheus* features a diary entry from Weyland (in an extras section called ‘The

Peter Weyland Files' (Lindelof & Spaihts, 2012)) writing about a mentor that sounds suspiciously like Eldon Tyrell, the founder of the Tyrell corporation:

A mentor and long-departed competitor once told me it was time to put away childish things and abandon my "toys." He encouraged me to come work for him and together we could take over the world and become the new gods. That's how he ran his corporation, like a god on top of a pyramid overlooking a city of angels...and look how that turned out for the poor bastard...I always suggested he stick with simple robotics instead of those genetic abominations he enslaved and sold off-world, although his idea to implement them with false memories was, well... "amusing," is how I would put it politely. (Lindelof & Spaihts, 2012)

The entry date of the diary is also of particular interest: 2090.01.11. If the date entry mode of the future is set to the Gregorian Year-Day-Month Calendar (like the one used by the modern-day government of Kazakhstan, for example (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015)), this makes the diary entry date November 1st 2090, All Saints' Day, a holiday commemorating the saints who have ascended into heaven that is also conspicuously focused on reminding humans of their own mortality. One Lutheran Director of Music and Liturgy notes that much of the music played on All Saints Day can also be used in funeral liturgies or burial rites (Gehrke, 1994). Therefore, this date may reveal something of Weyland's feelings about this mentor: although Tyrell was ultimately killed by his own creation, in the eyes of Weyland, he had achieved godhood and paradise in both this life and the next (note that the entry is on All Saints' Day rather than All Souls, the holiday reserved for those who have died but whose souls are not in heaven). This is also indicative of how strong a hold patriarchal, and arguably toxic, power structures of the church remain in men who perpetuate and propel their power, even in fictionalised cyber-punk futures (note the use of the term 'miracle' to describe Dr. Stelline as well).

Blade Runner 2049 and *Prometheus* each feature crises surrounding reproduction, birth and capitalism: it is notable that in *Blade Runner 2049*, human infertility is not mentioned, whereas it is the main focus of *Prometheus*. In the *Blade Runner* and *Alien*

universes, humanity can successfully travel through space to distant moons, create advanced synthetics, and have functioning transportable automated surgery tables, but it is made clear by *Prometheus* that science still cannot treat infertility (as mentioned in Chapter 3). To an educated viewer in 2020, this is not at all surprising if one considers the history of medical research, throughout which problems that impact men have been taken far more seriously than those that impact women (Holdcroft, 2007, p. 2). First, the later incarnation of the Weyland Corporation (the Weyland-Yutani Corporation) owned ‘pretty much everything’ by the 2150s (Lebbon, 2014, p. 50). This means that by the time the *Prometheus* launched, the Weyland Corporation was well on the way to domination. The Weyland Corporation is an organisation that the *Alien* universe indicates as profit-driven. The majority of stories set in the *Alien* universe show the Corporation’s willingness to sacrifice human life and decency for profit. This is one of the reasons that infertility in 2091 is so puzzling: there is huge potential for monetary profit in providing such a service. However, that would require marketing to women, who are still routinely overlooked and/or misunderstood as consumers (Barletta, 2003). Women seek fertility treatment more often and with greater frequency than do their male partners, even though the treatment of female infertility is more invasive and more costly (Whiteford & Gonzalez, 1995, p. 27). This also reflects the fact that dominant gender-oriented social norms put the onus on women when it comes to fertility: because women are expected to reproduce, they are also expected to remedy infertility. Even though around half of the world’s infertility sufferers are men, infertility remains a social burden for women (Inhorn & Patrizio, 2015, p. 411).² Perhaps this is why Weyland-Yutani has not monetized infertility treatments: the *Alien* universe is just as patriarchal as our current world, with health issues and social burdens that impact women as an afterthought (for instance, many breast

² A grossly overpopulated world would make such services obsolete, but even that argument is negated by the fact that the Weyland Corporation and Weyland-Yutani colonise different worlds.

cancer campaigns advocate ‘saving the boobies’, as opposed to saving the lives of those to whom the ‘boobies’ are attached) (Enkevort, 2014, p. 3).

What implications, then, does biological reproduction among replicants and female infertility have for the world of *Blade Runner 2049*? Wallace is arguably the individual with the most power in the *Blade Runner 2049* universe but is sometimes written off by academics as ‘a hollow repetition of Tyrell as the next iteration of a pre-climate disaster capitalist, insisting that development continue apace through the enslavement of replicants in order to continue the process of off-world colonisation’ (Hamblin & O’Connell, 2020, p. 39). While

[i]t may be amusingly tempting to rehabilitate Leto’s bizarre, halting portrayal of Wallace as a reflection of hollow, retro-futurist zombie capitalism, both his and the replicants’ desire for biological reproduction, which are meant to be in opposition, are instead part and parcel of the same animating logic. (Hamblin & O’Connell, 2020, p. 39)

Here, Hamblin and O’Connell connect previous scholarship surrounding how images and ideology associated with femininity ideologies assist in constructing more ideal workers for the capitalist system (Acker, 2004). Additionally, case studies surrounding formerly socialist countries entering the global capitalist market suggest that this can require ‘a restoration or strengthening of traditional, capitalist gender, race, and class hierarchies’ (Acker, 2004, p. 37). Does this mean that replicant women will experience patriarchy differently now that they are expected to produce workers to uphold this system? The writers of *Blade Runner 2049* provide little indication in this regard, further cementing the male gaze of the film.

Vint notes that ‘biological reproduction among replicants speaks to a fantasy that labour-power might ensure its own never-ending supply without the need for additional investment by the capitalist’ (Vint, 2020, p. 15), before comparing Wallace’s methods to real-life US chattel slavery ‘with biological gestation thereby subsumed into an image of fixed capital whose production enriches its owner’ (Vint, 2020, p. 15), as the children of slave women were also born enslaved. By connecting replicants to economic logics of real-life

synthetic biology (in which is it labour-intensive to create an initial cell-culture of yeast or bacteria but very little cost to create multiple copies), Vint shows how *Blade Runner 2049* makes visible ‘a contemporary social fantasy of biology fully woven into capitalist production’ (Vint, 2020, p. 16). Vint also notes that while Wallace is clearly a negative character, the film fails to connect Wallace’s malice to the pursuit of capital (Vint, 2020).

Perhaps this is why Wallace never mentions human reproduction, instead focusing on his own (arguably more profitable) corner of the market: replicants. Or, as Murphy suggests, this could be because Wallace is just another misogynist who doesn’t view women as people, regardless of whether the woman is human or replicant: ‘For Wallace, these (women) replicants are merely the latest releases that can be treated as nothing but a commodity, and Rachael’s child is simply the next step in his business model’ (Murphy, 2020, p. 100):

As a capitalist Wallace sees this [the replicant offspring] as a way to significantly reduce his costs of production: Replicants can reproduce themselves, labouring bodies that can go into labour. (Flisfeder, 2020, p. 146)

Forced breeding is a grisly future for any sentient being, and it has a very real, non-fictional presence in our world. For instance, colonial Portugal made attempts to raise the birth rate in Angola, to provide ‘docile’ labouring native bodies (Birmingham, 2006). In the world of *Blade Runner 2049*, Wallace goes beyond the aforementioned ‘bad dad’ mad scientist trope and veers towards rhetoric used by modern-day incels (men who claim that they are victims of women, making them ‘involuntarily celibate’ (Ging, 2017), as discussed in Chapter 2), who propagate in communities online. Sometimes, this online toxicity translates into real-life violence. Other scholars have noted this connection, stating:

The Incels’ ascent to mainstream social discourse is due, in part, to the acts of violence perpetrated by Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, whom Incels glorify for avenging the perceived injustices of an oppressive feminist society (Ging, 2017, p. 3). The consensus among Incel chatrooms is that feminists, social justice warriors, and alpha males are to blame for their inability to have sexual relationships (Ging, 2017, p. 3). Overall, Incels subscribe to a notion of masculinity that is defined by a tally of “sexual conquests” and referring to women as “emotionally cruel,” “sexually deviant

subhumans” (Grinnell College, n.d.) who are inferior to men intellectually and genetically and must, therefore, be controlled. (Labba, 2019, p. 18)

Blade Runner 2049 features Wallace butchering a new-born adult replicant woman (while delivering a pretentious monologue) because she is unable to reproduce, in front of his right-hand ‘fixer’ replicant, the assassin Luv. Luv cries silently as Wallace guts the unnamed replicant woman like a fish. Vint notes that:

He stabs the replicant in a gesture that seems to open her torso precisely at her uterus (the visuals focus on the blood running down her legs rather than the wound itself). As the scene comes to a close, Wallace kisses the replicant just before she collapses to the ground as he laments losing the ‘trick’ of procreation perfected by Tyrell. (Vint, 2020, p. 18)

Vin says that making the human character unemotional and lacking in empathy and the replicant character emotional is one of the scene’s multiple ironies (Vint, 2020). Similarly, in an online essay, film critic Hodges notes:

To Luv, this replicant woman is her family, her kin, and she stands in motionless quiet agony watching this murder. To intervene, to save her, is a barrier she cannot transcend, but she still experiences the human feelings of pain and empathy. Her tears come seconds before the violent display takes place, in anticipation but clearly not surprise. This is not the first time Luv has endured this sight, and it’s arguable that bearing witness to such horror has formed the emotional human side of an inhuman creation. (Hodges, 2017)

Neither scholar analyses tropes of masculinity or the male gaze surrounding female trauma. First, Wallace being unemotional is arguably a tenet of toxic masculinity (of which incels are also a part). Luv, a synthetic woman, is made real by being forced to endure numerous traumas surrounding birth, something that human women can do and she cannot. It is arguably problematic for writers of fiction to use trauma as a means to make their female characters more sympathetic to a hypothetical audience. Much discussion of how male writers use gendered trauma to ‘humanise’ women has occurred in academia (such as when discussing rape used as trope to cause the audience to humanise and empathise with female characters in *Game of Thrones* (Ferreday, 2015)). As the previous chapter mentioned,

involuntary childlessness is associated with significantly greater psychological distress for women (McQuillan, et al., 2003, p. 1007). Is Luv a proxy for an involuntarily childless human woman that the involuntarily celibate Wallace can torture into submission (Hoffman et al., 2020)? Luv, like Joi, is ‘defined solely in her role as a companion’ (Murphy, 2020, p. 101), making her as much of a ‘pleasure model’ as Joi (although Murphy misses this point) and is killed in the last of many violent acts intended to clean up Wallace’s messes, like a mother cleaning up the mess left behind by a petulant child.

As mentioned in a previous monograph (DiGioia, 2020), incels often purport to be motivated by science, reason and logic. Research has shown that incels in fact often rely on (untrue) ‘biological arguments’ and incorrect beliefs surrounding genetic determinism, such as the idea that incels cannot succeed in society because, through misfortune, they lack the genes that make other men attractive (Baele et al., 2019; Ging, 2017). Wallace is a man of science and opts to have bio-mechanic add-ons to strengthen his (apparently) inferior human senses. In the same scene in which the newborn woman replicant is slaughtered by Wallace, Wallace activates a chip that has been implanted in his head. This causes a swarm of black tiny camera ‘drones’ to enter the room and encircle the unnamed female replicant. Vint argues this is because the ‘prosthetics function to mute our sense of Wallace’s humanity: his distanced affect and failure to make eye contact creates a sense of a machinic inhumanity’ (Vint, 2020, p. 17).

While an interesting and entirely valid interpretation of this scene, my initial viewing of *Blade Runner 2049* gave me a different impression entirely. In this scene that contains both the birth and death of the unnamed naked female replicant, I believe that Wallace has moved beyond the ‘bad dad/mad scientist’ trope and the humanity/replicant trope entirely, and is attempting to rebrand himself as a wrathful patriarchal god. Male creation has been discussed in depth in science fiction and horror, ranging from *Frankenstein* (1818) to the

present. These studies also connect to classical mythology. Alvares and Salzman-Mitchell discuss a male scientist creating gynoid robot women in the context of the 2015 film *Ex Machina* (Alvares & Salzman-Mitchell, 2019). Alvares and Salzman-Mitchell connect the male creators and themes in *Ex Machina* to characters (Zeus, Pygmalion, Cronos), omnipresent themes in Greek mythology (battles between the old and new generations, between men and women, conflicts surrounding crime and justice) and ancient poets (Hesiod and Ovid) (Alvares & Salzman-Mitchell, 2019). *Ex Machina* takes these classic themes and blends them with new anxieties around technology and what it means to be human, while offering a serious critique of late capitalism and patriarchal society (Alvares & Salzman-Mitchell, 2019). *Blade Runner 2049* attempts to do the same, although it arguably fails to rebuke either patriarchal society or late capitalism.

In my interpretation, the swirling black camera drones do not suggest a human becoming more like a machine but rather an egotistical human man attempting to become a god. The drones could be interpreted as larger and more modern incarnations of Huginn and Muninn ('Thought and Memory') (Stone, 1989), the ravens of Odin, circling the replicant to tell Wallace what they could see that he cannot. In Norse mythology, Odin is the oldest and most elevated of all the gods, ruling the entirety of humanity. No matter how powerful the other gods may be, they yield to Odin like children: hence one of Odin's monikers, 'Allfather' (Starkey, 1999). Odin is also associated in some ways with the feminine: Odin has been previously depicted as shapeshifting into women to seduce male lovers (Craigie, 1906) or as wearing women's attire (Mannering, 2014) in myth. More importantly, Odin is a creator god (Ciklamini, 1962) who, alongside his brother, rebuilt the world from the rotting remains of a giant (perhaps, in *Blade Runner 2049*, Tyrell represents the giant Ymir). Therefore, Wallace, in this cyberpunk future, resembles Odin, in that he is,

[a] newcomer, an usurper of giants' rights, for he belongs to neither the first nor the most powerful race to evolve. Only ambition, determination, and cunning gain him

the privilege of fashioning and ruling a fruitful, orderly world (Ciklamini, 1962, p. 145).

Ciklamini is describing Odin here but of course Wallace also strives to rule over a new world, built from the rotting carcass of the old: as other scholars have noted, Wallace reinterprets Tyrell's pyramid and colour palette, for example (Schmeink, 2020).

Vint's analysis of the drone scene also does not mention that Wallace is blind. In fact, early versions of the *Blade Runner 2049* script called for Wallace to have no eyes at all (Lapointe, Tanya; Alcon Entertainment, 2017). Leto worked with the Junior Blind League of America to better understand how a blind person would behave, and wore opaque contact lenses that made it impossible for him to see when in character as Wallace. Therefore, it can be said that Wallace's blindness (rather than his cruelty) explains why he does not make eye contact with Luv, as well as further associating him with one-eyed Odin. Odin exchanges his missing eye for the ability to see into the past, present and future, in a successful attempt to save humanity (much like Wallace's genetically-altered food output saved humanity, although it is unclear if Wallace was blinded before or after this revelation). If viewed in the context of Wallace-as-Odin, this makes the lack of eye contact in this scene not 'machinic inhumanity' (Vint, 2020, p. 17) but godlike inhumanity.

A final connection to Odin is found in Luv. Luv describes herself as Wallace's 'best' creation (*Blade Runner 2049*, 2017). Wallace clearly views replicants as a holy army that 'could storm Eden and retake her' (*Blade Runner 2049*). If Wallace is leading this war as Odin, then Luv is clearly his Valkyrie, a handmaiden trained to be efficient in battle, protecting some, damning others, and transforming the futility of a violent death into a destiny determined by divine beings (Friðriksdóttir, 2020). Luv clearly fits this designation: every murder committed by Luv is at the behest of Wallace. Critics have noticed that despite having three opportunities to kill K in *Blade Runner 2049*, Luv refrains from doing so,

perhaps because, unlike K, Luv cannot transcend her baseline programming (Hodges, 2017), (another indication of *Blade Runner 2049*'s misogyny). The same happens in the construction of gender in Old Norse Myth. Of all the female characters in Old Norse myth, Brynhildr is arguably the closest to Luv: a battle-hardened shieldmaiden and Valkyrie, Brynhildr offends Odin, by either disobedience (as a Valkyrie) or by winning too many battles (as a human), and is punished. Odin forces Brynhildr to abandon being a warrior, to become a wife and mother (Norrman, 2000). Luv's inability to reproduce may be as close Luv gets to exemplifying the cyborg future Haraway (1991) envisioned (although Luv certainly fails in not believing she is exceptional). Perhaps Luv's tears at the death of the replicant do not express empathy, but rage that replicants giving birth may mean that she or other replicants like her would have to hang up their weapons and adhere to a reinstated patriarchal norm. Luv's tears could easily stem from viewing childbirth as a punishment.

If Wallace is viewed as Odin, he has a foil in Freysa Sadeghpour. Like Odin, Freysa is also missing an eye, having removed the ocular implant to avoid detection as a replicant, but her name can easily be read as a variant of Freya, a goddess associated with love, beauty and war (Coats, 2017) who receives half of those who die in battle in her hall, Fólkvangr (the other half go to Odin's hall, Valhalla) (Vestin, 2013). Fertility and war are certainly present in Freysa. As a resistance leader formally associated with the military, Freysa is used to war. Additionally, Freysa was present when Rachael delivered her baby, and, as other scholars have noted, takes charge of her wards (Parker-Flynn, 2017). Unfortunately, Freysa gets little screen-time, so any further analysis would be very speculative. Understanding that, I think there are clear parallels to Freysa's revolutionaries being selected for her 'Fólkvangr', as opposed to Wallace's fixers, who are instead destined for his version of 'Valhalla'.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed birth and parenthood in *Blade Runner 2049* as a focal point of the plot. After giving birth to what some consider a miracle and others an abomination, Rachael (or a variant thereof) dies both on and offscreen, her brains and bones shown to the viewers. The fact that pseudo-Rachael's death leads to Deckard connecting with his daughter, as well as Rachael's symbolic annihilation in *Blade Runner 2049*, firmly places Rachael alongside other dead/absent mothers. This chapter also compared 'bad dad' Wallace to Odin, showing how old myths are retold and reimagined under patriarchy. Much like its box office returns, when it comes to *Blade Runner 2049* subverting patriarchal standards, it is a total bust.

Chapter 5. “I can't lie to you about your chances, but... you have my sympathies”.

“If you're receiving this transmission, make no attempt to come to its point of origin. There is only death here now, and I'm leaving it behind.” (Scott, Prometheus, 2012)

Feminist researchers have often addressed and acknowledged disparities in power in human relationships, as well as oppressive power structures that support and sustain these inequalities (Reinharz, 1992). Arguably, personal, introspective writing contributes to a richer feminism, by telling the stories of individuals who are marginalised, as well as making good use of one's own, individual experiences (Allen, 2005). For these reasons, autoethnography is firmly within the tradition of feminist study (Ettorre, 2016):

With autoethnography, we see the transformative power of “writing the self”, transforming personal stories into political realities by revealing power inequalities inherent in human relationships and the complex cultures of emotions embedded in these unequal relationships. (Ettorre, 2016, p. 2)

As Jasmine Shadrack said in her recent monograph, ‘[w]riting about trauma through autoethnography is a liberating experience’ (Shadrack, 2021, p. 9). Like Shadrack, by using autoethnography, ‘I am able to revisit my subjective experience in a way that allows analytical perspective, critical distance, and perhaps most importantly, healing or catharsis’ (ibid.). Miller writes that several graphic novels that tell cancer stories ‘confront the disease on its own terms: indolent but relentless, aggressive, and, above all, unpredictable’ (Miller, 2014, p. 210). This is not unlike a xenomorph or a rogue replicant, fighting for their life. I thought about the films of Scott constantly throughout my cancer journey, and reflect on that here.

I have often written about the experiences of other women (real and fictional). This is the first time I have attempted to write about myself. I, like other female auto-ethnographers, am suffering from some anxiety regarding how I present myself: I want to be honest, yet I am

also anxious that my readers will think less of me once they know what I really think (Wall, 2008). I also have imposter syndrome: Susan Sontag withheld her own cancer story from her own work, because she thought another repetitive tale about how someone learned they had cancer and the subsequent suffering, struggles, and courage was not useful (Sontag, 2001). If a titan like Sontag thought her story couldn't help anyone, how can mine? I also pause at the voyeuristic element that can come with observing someone's pain: our culture has a distinct curiosity about peering at other's private wounds (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I struggled with wondering whether or not I should open my wound up to the world, after all the stares I receive at my bald head, and bloated face (from steroids). One of those moments that is emblazoned in my mind came when an old man with an upper-class accent asked me if I had "a disease, or something" as I waited for a talk from one of my favourite academics to begin at UCL. My spirit was crushed. Not only was this an intrusive and unsympathetic question from a complete stranger, but also an unpleasant encounter in which someone had noticed and observed that I looked unwell, forcing me to talk about and name the disease, thrusting me from my feelings of normalcy and back into what one horror film icon (Pinhead) calls "the worst nightmare of all...reality" (Bota, 2002). It took a monumental effort on my part to go to that talk: I was sick, I was bald from intense chemotherapy, and I was tired, but I was excited all the same (and hoping the academic would sign my copy of the book they had just written). In fact, in those few moments waiting for the talk to begin, I didn't even feel nauseous. All of that came tumbling down in an instant, showing that a cut-glass accent belies uncouth behaviour. Like another horror movie classic, *Candyman* (1992), it was as if by naming the cancer, I was calling it into being. I wanted to scream, I wanted to curse. Instead, I just stared at him and replied, "I have cancer".

While the various ways in which I was poorly treated by various men and the medical system partially inspired me to write this story, my main inspirations were other women.

Audre Lorde exposed her own anguish after breast cancer, writing that ‘I am a post-mastectomy woman who believes our feelings need voice in order to be recognized, and of use’ (Lorde, 1980, p. 9). Similarly, Nancy K. Miller (2014) shared images and prose she wrote after being diagnosed with stage 3B lung cancer in December, 2011. Like these women before me, I have opted to do something different from Sontag’s rejection of personal cancer narrative. Doing so isn’t a criticism of her choices, and each individual person can make their own decision (and that decision in and of itself can be private). I know that during my own cancer journey, reading the personal accounts of other individuals who had undergone the same experience I was having was extremely helpful. I hope that this chapter helps someone else as much as Lorde (1980) and Miller (2014) have helped me.

In the spirit of Wolcott (1999), my story is simply one way of telling the world what it is like for a real woman to go through cancer treatment, and how that woman finds her experiences to be similar to events and situations in the worlds of Ridley Scott. I am not saying that this is the only way, or the only story, that is valid. Some cancer patients and survivors do not look at their stories as riddled with horror and dread: some individuals are upbeat, inquisitive and positive when discussing their cancer experiences (Ehrenreich, 2009). I tend to align myself more with Audre Lorde, who is grateful for her cancer survival but also writes that, ‘[l]ooking on the bright side of things is a euphemism used for obscuring certain realities of life’ (Lorde, 1980, p. 74). That being said, more positive stories by other cancer patients and survivors are just as valid as my own. I also want to make it explicitly clear that the National Health Service saved my life, and should be protected and lauded. All of my criticisms regarding treatment are rooted in systemic, endemic challenges related to women obtaining medical treatment that can be found throughout the globe. Like other many other survivors of trauma, if asked for a timeline, I could not honestly give one with accuracy

(Clough & Halley, 2007): the past, present and future are malleable and shifting as I attempt to recall these events.

Finally, I am not the first person (or even the first academic) to compare cancer to the *Alien* universe. One academic paper written by biologists even uses a quote from *Alien vs Predator* (2004) as a springboard to describe autoimmunity vs cancer as ‘Predator vs alien’ (Berens, Lauber, & Herrmann, 2013, p. 287). That being said, too often it is pale, stale males that control the narrative. It is now my turn to contribute my own story, and to tie it into a greater narrative on the worlds of *Alien*, as well as birth and trauma.

I remember some... horrible dream about... smothering? I don't know... Anyway, where are we? (Scott, Alien, 1979)

Like Kane in *Alien* (1979), the last moments of my life as I knew it were heralded by a cough. I had a persistent, nagging cough that I couldn't shake, spanning early autumn to winter. My morning runs (I was training for a half-marathon at the time) went from something I anticipated eagerly to something I dreaded. I just couldn't breathe deeply enough, and my times were suffering. I became exhausted much more easily than normal. I went to an academic conference and metal music festival in Finland, and found that I couldn't stand up for an entire set. I left the festival early, complaining to my friend (a paramedic) about my exhaustion and a pain in my chest. At my sister's wedding, again I couldn't stay on my feet long enough and, exhausted, left before the end of the reception. The photos from her wedding day are evidence of how I was feeling internally: after the wedding dinner, my smile is strained, and I disappear as soon as the dancing started. I awoke that night, like many nights, to find myself drenched in sweat, something I attributed to the summer heat. To top things off, I vomited nearly every morning. ‘Being the Brundlefly’ was what I called it at the time, in reference to the Cronenberg (1986) character played by Jeff

Goldblum. Clearly this wasn't morning sickness, as I wasn't pregnant. I had to constantly insist upon this to doctors, who asked me if there was a possibility if I was pregnant at every appointment, disregarding the fact that I had a hormonal intrauterine device (IUD, also known as a coil) inserted into my uterus, which made my chance of pregnancy of very low. In fact, less than 1% of people who use a hormonal IUD will get pregnant with typical use (Mayo Clinic, 2020). Instead, like Seth Brundle, I began to transform into something new myself.

I went to multiple doctors, begging them to find the root cause of whatever malady I had. They insisted on focusing their explorations on my bowel or my mental health, while I implored them to look at my entire body. The doctors I saw were all men. They claimed that I was stressed from doing a PhD at University College London, but I had lived with mental health challenges all of my life and I knew that this was not anxiety. This was something different. Eventually, I saw a female general practitioner (Dr Aura Zahan), and she saved my life. After informing Dr Zahan that I had thrown up while waiting for my appointment, she took my pulse. 'This is not anxiety', she said. Dr Zahan then ordered me to get a full body computerised tomography (CT) scan.

That scan found some things.

In my chest.

But they didn't know what they were.

There were mysterious things in my chest this entire time. Why didn't anyone take me seriously earlier?

My story is not unusual. Women with various medical conditions (such as fibromyalgia) are often unheard, not believed, or simply not taken seriously as authorities on their own bodies and minds (Sallinen, Kukkurainen, & Peltokallio, 2011). Cancer survival

rates are not just determined by what stage of the cancer is when diagnosis occurs. Other factors include,

socioeconomic status (income, education), neighbourhood disadvantage, unemployment, racial discrimination, social support, and social network. Other social determinants of health include medical distrust, immigration, status, inadequate housing, food insecurity, and geographic factors such as neighbourhood access to health services. (Coughlin, 2019, p. 537)

Other women face steeper uphill battles with cancer than I do. For instance, Black women with breast cancer in the United States have significantly lower survival rates post-treatment, and often present more often with advanced disease (Coughlin, 2019; Mathews, Lannin, & Mitchell, 1994). Immigrant women in both Canada and Israel face barriers (economic, language or cultural) when accessing cervical and breast cancer screening (Ferdous et al., 2018; Remennick, 2003). Higher rates of cancer fear and fatalism (when compared to white women) in Caribbean, African, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi women may be contributing factors to lower engagement with cancer prevention and early cancer detection in the United Kingdom (Vrinten, Wardle, & Marlow, 2016). The LGBTQIA+ community also faces barriers regarding cancer treatment, related to lack of effort to identify and service the cancer healthcare needs of this population (Quinn et al., 2015). I am a white, heterosexual, cis-gender woman and so in the spirit of intersectionality and reflexivity, and in the context just described, I want to acknowledge my privilege in this situation.

I was summoned for another scan to determine what exactly was going on in my chest. A positron emission tomography (PET) scan tracks the metabolic process in your body by using a radiotracer. The radiotracer is injected into your veins (after you remove your clothing and piercings and change into a hospital gown). Moving and speaking can impact the tracer's efficacy (National Health Service, 2018). So, during this time, you are to stay still and silent as the radiotracer inches its way through your veins. I imagined that, like other women, I might be pretty good at this. Under patriarchy, we train our whole lives to be quiet

and still. It's as if we are trying to evade a xenomorph. After an hour of stillness, you are escorted to the room where the scan happens. The machine itself consists of a flatbed that then moves into the centre of a large, cylindrical scanner. You must again lie completely still during the entire process. I remember lying on the table and feeling like Dr Elizabeth Shaw: helpless, braced for the worst. It also brought to mind yet another myth, this time from the ancient Egyptians. I felt as if Anubis (the God of the Afterlife and a guide to lost souls) was weighing my heart. I felt the hot breath of Ammit (a demoness and monster) beneath me, waiting to consume my soul (Carelli, 2011). The movement of the flatbed to me was like arm of a scale, tipping me towards my fate. Like Dr Elizabeth Shaw, who followed the star maps of several ancient cultures to find the world of the Engineers, I thought of god(s) as a way to process the trauma of my world.

About a week later, University College London Hospital almost let me walk out of the building without telling me my scan results: apparently, the specialist who was scheduled to give me the results had not arrived, so I was to remain in limbo until someone could see me. I left, frustrated, and sat on a bench at the hospital. I had been sick for so long, and was so tired from the trip from South Tottenham (where I lived) to UCLH. My eyes stained with tears, I did what came naturally: I called my mother, who had once been a licensed practical nurse on a general research floor that often treated cancer patients, and asked her advice. Advice can be deemed a type of communicative social support (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997) and women are so often the source of it. Mothers are more often perceived as open to direct communication than fathers (Lester, et al., 2017), so perhaps this is why I opted to call my mother rather than my father: she has always been more likely to pick up the phone. I asked my mother if it was out of order of me to go back and demand to be seen. She responded that I should do exactly that. So I did.

The receptionist called her manager, who agreed to see me and told me there was

something ‘extremely unusual’ on my PET scan. There was something (or rather, some *things*) in my mediastinum, part of the thoracic cavity that contains the breastbone in front, the spine in the back, the heart, thymus gland, oesophagus and trachea, along with various nerves, lymph nodes, arteries and veins (Stoddard, Heil & Lowery, 2020). The mediastinum is divided compartmentally into several subdivisions: superior, anterior, middle and posterior (Stoddard, Heil & Lowery, 2020). The doctor did not tell me where these masses were, but rather that they were glowing, indicating rapid metabolic activity. They didn’t know what it was: it could be an infection, or it could be cancer. They did know that it was weird, and it was growing. They would need to do a biopsy to find out exactly what was lurking below the surface.

“It has to go back. All sorts of tests have to be made.” (Scott, Alien, 1979)

Because of my PET scan results, I ultimately had to have two biopsies. The first, in early November, was a far less invasive endoscopic ultrasound-guided fine-needle aspiration biopsy. This means that I was put under light anaesthesia, my jaw was propped open, and an endoscope with an ultrasound probe was inserted into my oesophagus (Costache et al., 2013). Notice how, as in the world of *Alien*, things were constantly entering my body through the mouth. The ultrasound probe allowed the doctor to see where to place the biopsy needle, so they could successfully negotiate my oesophagus and the lymph nodes in my chest (which had also glowed on the PET scan). I remembered that the doctor at the previous appointment had neglected to tell me where the masses in my mediastinum were located. Now, a doctor kindly obliged me, pulled up my scan and said they were located in the anterior mediastinum, at the front of the chest (Stoddard, Heil, & Lowery, 2020).

The doctor was right in saying my case was ‘extremely unusual’: in general, mediastinal tumours are rare and cannot be prevented (The Cleveland Clinic, 2019). In adults,

tumours often manifest in the anterior mediastinum, and are generally found to be malignant lymphomas (cancer of the lymph system: white blood cells, bone marrow, etc.) or thymomas (when cancer cells form on the outside of the thymus, the organ that makes white blood cells) (The Cleveland Clinic, 2019). However, there was still a chance that the mass in my chest was some sort of benign growth, hence the need for the biopsy. Cancerous or not, if left untreated tumours can do severe damage. Complications include the tumour spreading to the heart, the pericardium (the lining of the heart) or important blood vessels (The Cleveland Clinic, 2019). My paramedic friend in Finland messaged me shortly after the procedure, asking how it went. I replied that I had masses in my anterior mediastinum and my friend responded that she felt like she just got hit in the head with a cinderblock. She reminded me, for I had forgotten, that this part of my body is exactly where I had pointed to when I told her my chest hurt that summer. I had identified the source of my pain months ago.

My partner and I sat in stasis, waiting for the results. Like myself, my partner is a huge fan of the *Alien* universe: I always joke that I knew our relationship would survive because we went to *Alien: Covenant* (2017) for one of our first dates. To ease the tension, I attempted to joke with him now. I said there was a xenomorph growing inside me and quoted Parker shouting “Why don’t you freeze him?” at Kane in the medical bay. I also quoted *The Thing* (1982): “I dunno what the hell’s in there, but it’s weird and pissed off, whatever it is”. About a week after the endoscopy, I was called into the Macmillan Cancer Centre, at University College London Hospital. Going into a cancer centre for a first time felt very much like the crew of the *Prometheus* exploring the Engineers’ home world: everything was familiar and unfamiliar. Danger lurked around every corner.

I knew cancer, long before I had it: my paternal grandmother suffered from breast cancer, as had my aunt and several of my friends’ mothers. This is typical, and again both familiar and strange: Miller writes that, “[t]he omnipresence of cancer on the American scene

has been the subject of proliferating cancer narratives—autobiographical, historical, scientific, filmic and graphic” (Miller, 2014, p. 207). Cancer is also prevalent in literature. Simone de Beauvoir wrote *A Very Easy Death*, a prose memoir about her mother’s cancer and treatment, in the 1960s: this text soon became a precursor to many contemporary illness memoirs (Miller, 2014). Upon its release, I voraciously read an “autobiography” of cancer, *The Emperor of All Maladies* (2010). The author, a haematology/oncology fellow at Massachusetts General Hospital, wrote the book in response to a patient telling him “I’m willing to go on fighting, but I need to know what it is that I’m battling” (McGrath, 2010). Like other scholars, I believe that this battle metaphor is one that is very masculinity-centric (Lorde, 1980), and I note how the use of these metaphors can be a “possible disconnect between medical discourse and patient narrative” (Gallardo, 2018, p. 51). Little did I know I would soon have an audience in the Emperor’s court myself.

To many individuals with cancer, the moment of diagnosis can be viewed as ‘the gateway into the emotional journey of cancer patients as shaped by the medical norms and clichés of today’s oncological discourse’ (Miller, 2014, p. 207). Like many parts of my cancer journey, my moment of diagnosis was atypical. The doctor told me that I had cancer, but once again, I was a strange case. They didn’t know what type of cancer I had, and could not definitively determine this from the fine-needle biopsy. This is where, as stated in the introduction and perhaps inspired by my constant internal referencing and quoting of *Alien*, I asked if they were sure it was not an alien baby. I had a diagnosis (cancer), but nothing specific, and therefore no prognosis. Miller elaborates what typically occurs in this situation:

The diagnosis of cancer deals an initial blow, a shock to mind and body— a traumatic event. At the moment of diagnosis, when all you have is the signifier CANCER, you are, in that instant, a heartbeat away from prognosis. Prognosis follows quickly on the heels of diagnosis; it tells how long you might have to live, depending on staging, treatment, and statistics. The effects of the blow continue after the diagnosis as a perpetual rewounding of the mind as the body spools its melancholy time of prognosis, however long that may turn out to be. Life-threatening illnesses like cancer have been characterized in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*

(DSM) since 1994 as stressors and predictors of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). (Miller, 2014, p. 208)

More succinctly, Jain writes: “The prognosis activates terror—the shock of having harboured cancer, the fear of an unknown future seemingly presented through survival-rate numbers, the brush with a culture of death” (Jain, 2007, p. 78). I had shock, but couldn’t place my terror yet without the prognosis. Unlike Miller’s experience in which ‘[p]rognosis follow quickly on the heels of diagnosis’, I was once again in limbo. As human characters so often are in the *Alien* films, I was vulnerable and fighting the unknown as a proverbial time-bomb ticked away inside of me. To top it all off, at the point of diagnosis, neither of my parents had passports. While I had their love and support, and while my mother did ultimately get a passport and come to the UK, I did every week of chemotherapy without my family. For the overwhelming majority of my treatment, my real human mother was akin to the fictional MU-TH-UR 6000 artificial-intelligence computer mainframe in *Alien* (1979), or the MU-TH-UR in *Alien: Covenant* (2017): she was a voice or a string of text that I could turn to for guidance or assistance throughout this time of great distress, but not a physical presence that could physically hold or sit beside me. Like the crew of a long-haul spaceship, I was isolated, navigating an alien world.

My second biopsy was more invasive than the first. This procedure is called a laparoscopy (keyhole surgery), and is traditionally used to diagnose or treat a variety of conditions (National Health Service, 2018). Minor surgical instruments are inserted into the body through small incisions and then the doctor performs whatever surgical procedure is required (National Health Service, 2018). In my case, this surgery also required general anaesthesia, my lung to be collapsed so the doctor could access the area required, and a drainage tube to be inserted between my ribs with a bucket attached to collect the fluid that dribbled out. After a day, and various sets of x-rays, the drainage tube would be removed,

and the stitches already inserted by the doctor pulled together. I remember asking the surgeon beforehand if I could see a picture of what they cut out of me, but was told they usually don't take photographs of samples. When I asked why not, they countered as to why I was so curious. I made it, didn't I?

As discussed in my chapter on the worlds of *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017), I spoke to the anaesthesiologist about my first book, and *Dracula* (1897). While administering my anaesthesia, the doctor asked me what year *Dracula* was published. I started to say "1897", but couldn't get the whole year out before the anaesthesia kicked in. I woke up, feeling very much like a vampiric Lucy Westenra: I had an intense pain in my chest from the drain inserted into my ribcage and was surrounded by faces and voices talking about me as if I was not there. Seeing that I had come to, the anaesthesiologist informed me that I smiled when I woke up, something that apparently amused them. I would not stay smiling: the pain from the drain was intense. One nurse on the dayshift told me that patients who had experienced childbirth before getting this procedure done said that childbirth was less painful. This fact has stayed with me. I have never brought a pregnancy to term. How would I know what that felt like? How could I compare this pain to that one? And why do we continually use childbirth as a yardstick against which to measure pain, while simultaneously denying women's pain and dismissing their attempts to speak about their own bodies? I was in a world of hurt. I had good reason to be: it turned out that the night nurse had failed to provide me with my pain relief beyond paracetamol, despite me pointing out that the number of pills I had received was incorrect.

Meanwhile, the tumours were still in my chest, and still growing. The tube between my ribs certainly did not help my breathing: I would wake up, gasping for air in the night. Like Kane, I had horrible dreams of not being able to breathe. I also had to navigate the world with my new friend, the bucket. If I left my bed, so did my bucket. Like the

facehugger's ovipositor snugly inserted into its victim's oesophagus, the bucket was securely attached to me, via the tube jammed between my ribs. The fluid seeping from me into the bucket resembled some kind of sugar-and-vinegar sauce, or a fruity drink, but at least it wasn't acidic, xenomorph blood. The memories and images of that time crash through my head in rapid-fire images, like thunder or lightning in a storm.

The removal of the tube was painful, but a good pain, like the release of a knot in a muscle. With my stitches sorted, I was sent home to await their removal and my results. Again like Kane, I had some memory issues from the trauma of the medical event, but outwardly appeared fine. But, again like Kane, I wasn't fine. I tried to go about my normal routine (more on that in a minute) but struggled to focus. Like Ehrenreich writing about her experience with breast cancer, it "blurred the line between selfhood and thing-hood, organic and inorganic, me and it" (Ehrenreich, 2009, p. 20). What exactly was growing inside me?

At my next appointment, the doctors told me I had grey zone lymphoma (GZL). This is a relatively new clinical entity and was only recognised by the World Health Organisation in 2008:

The condition refers to unclassifiable B-cell lymphoma with characteristics intermediate between those of diffuse large B-cell lymphoma (DLBCL) and the classical Hodgkin lymphoma (CHL). This entity includes lymphomas that are characterized by clinical, morphological, and immunophenotypic features that overlap with those of DLBCL, such as primary mediastinal large B-cell lymphoma (PMBL) and nodular sclerosis CHL. Although DLBCL, nodular sclerosis CHL, and GZL are closely related, these are distinct diseases. Although extramediastinal site was found in several studies, these lymphomas commonly present as mediastinal lesion with high aggressiveness. (Yang et al., 2017, p. 8121).

This cancer is found mostly in men (Mallipudi et al., 2019). Compared to other lymphomas, mediastinal grey zone lymphoma is often aggressive, resistant to chemotherapy, and patients (like me) have worse outcomes than patients with either Classical Hodgkin's Lymphoma (CHL) or Primary Mediastinal large B-Cell lymphoma (PMBL or PMBCL) (Chihara et al., 2017; Traverse-Glehen et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2014). In fact, grey-zone lymphoma is so

rare that there is no standard treatment for it (Mallipudi et al., 2019).

In contrast to Jain (2007) and Miller (2014), who attribute sadness after prognosis to the fear of the unknown and melancholy surrounding mortality, I was despondent because I was away from my family, fighting an unknown enemy with few support networks based around it (unlike breast cancer, or Hodgkin's lymphoma). I also was struggling to accept that I had spent years in therapy, battling omnipresent mental health challenges that dominated my life, in order to stay alive and functional, only to be blindsided by a physical challenge. I now had to fight both the voices inside my head that told me I was worthless, horrible, and better off dead, and an entirely different form of deadly disease. In some ways, I felt like a hypocrite when I accepted cancer treatment: it felt like I was rejecting death, something that I had previously sought. I readily admit that, on particularly bad days, I wondered why I lived and why I opted for treatment at all.

Compounding my feelings of worthlessness and the futility of existence were simultaneous events in my academic career. Often, other people (including people in positions to help me) didn't know how to respond appropriately to my diagnosis. This could be tied to cancer-related taboos and how healthy people may project their fears of pain, death and disease onto cancer patients (Daher, 2012), just as people who are uncomfortable with death often do not know how to interact with people who have been recently bereaved (Range & Calhoun, 1990). This process cemented the fact that, while some lecturers know how to handle distressed students with ongoing health problems, many have no idea how to support students who are unwell or unhappy. Universities are simply not set up to offer this kind of support, or to train staff appropriately. Again, this could be correlated to society's inability to acknowledge other difficult issues touched on elsewhere in this book such as birth, infertility and death. Facing my mortality at such an early age also changed my outlook on my intellectual endeavours. I gained a great sense of urgency and began churning out

work (including the book you hold in your hand). This is perhaps connected to the fact that my work (while far from being a Homeric ode or an edda) is perhaps my only chance to obtain some semblance of immortality, as my chances of having children have been greatly reduced.

Nobody would know about the embryos we're carrying (Cameron, 1986): The Infertility Clinic

In one of my classes for my Master's in Women's Studies, we discussed the Goddess archetype. The Goddess archetype is akin to a cycle (McLean, 1989), often presented in a threefold form, due to the alleged prevalence of the triple form of the Goddess throughout the world (Conway, 1996). Unlike patriarchal dualities, such as "good versus evil", the polarities of the Goddess trinity are malleable and fluid (Gomberg, 2001). Akin to the phases of the moon, the three aspects of the Goddess are split into the following archetypes:

(a) maiden – in charge of her own sexuality, active, strong, powerful, bonded with women, intelligent, assertive, and capable of play; (b) mother – able to nurture, create, teach, heal, and protect; and (c) crone – wisdom, independence, choice, transformation, challenge, and death (Walker, 1983; Warwick, 1995). Women can reclaim power from the Goddess trinity by discovering and honouring multiple aspects of themselves. The trinity may remind women to fully experience the maiden, mother, and crone archetypes throughout their lives. The trinity may also encourage women to explore the multiplicity of each archetype. (Gomberg, 2001, p. 59).

Some therapists have reported that in women's group therapy settings, the threefold form of the Goddess archetype reaffirms women, supports collaboration with other women, strengthens resilience, and assists women in obtaining both personal and socio-political change (Gomberg, 2001). Understanding that, the maiden/mother/crone trinity does not necessarily relate to or reflect the full range of feminine experience. It also divides women into groups based on whether or not we can biologically procreate. Orlagh Costello, who teaches at the Irish Pagan School, has added some nuance to this model and refers to different

life stages as Youth, Adult, Wisdom-Keeper and Magic-Keeper (Costello, 2019). By discussing maiden/mother/crone here, I am reflecting upon discussions in class during my Masters, my personal relationship with these terms, and how I reflected upon them during my treatment for cancer. I am not trying to pigeonhole or force female deity into these very narrow terms of “womanity” when they just do not fit (and never will) for many women. Finally, I recognise that these terms can be read as extremely patriarchal, sexist, biological essentialist, and non-inclusive. Neither am I insisting that everyone must apply my own personal relationship with these terms to their spiritual practice, but rather noting that society still very much gives the message that the fertile cis-woman is the most important one, and that often a cis-woman’s fertility is the most important thing about her. At that point in my life, I did not want children. “I wish I could just fast-forward to crone,” I told my classmates. “I don’t want children, I want wisdom!” I never wanted to have children until I met my current partner, who has, time and again, proven that he is someone I could trust. When I met him, I certainly hoped that having children would be a possibility. Because of that, fertility was at the forefront of my mind when I was undergoing cancer treatment. Days before the Winter Solstice (which also featured a full moon, which means I was under the watchful eye of the mother aspect of the goddess), I had an appointment with Reproductive Medicine Unit at University College London Hospital.

The National Health Service offers fertility preservation services to cis-women undergoing cancer treatment. Oocytes (eggs) are highly susceptible to damage due to chemotherapy (NHS/Manchester University, 2021). Because of this, cis-women, and other people with ovaries who are undergoing chemotherapy treatment (especially those prescribed an increased dose and duration of chemotherapy treatment), have a high risk of oocyte damage, ultimately leading to the failure of their ovaries (NHS/Manchester University, 2021). Options for women and people with ovaries prior to certain types of chemotherapy

treatment vary, but include oocyte cryopreservation (egg freezing) or embryo cryopreservation (embryo freezing). An analogy can easily be made to the stasis tubes in the *Alien* universe: I was hoping that my eggs, or potentially, embryos, could be frozen, and, like the employees of Weyland-Yutani, ‘woken up’ when it was time for them to be of use. I have included a portion of a letter written by a doctor (anonymised), addressed to me from the Reproductive Medicine Unit at the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Obstetric Hospital that explains why this was not an option for me:

Fertility preservation is a difficult decision when an illness needs urgent treatment. The most effective method is freezing of eggs or embryos, but this takes 2-3 weeks. Your chemotherapy would not start until the New Year, and we would be worried about delaying your treatment. We can also freeze ovarian tissue, which is quicker but requires keyhole surgery, and putting the tissue back into the body in future might carry a risk of replacing some malignant cells; this is still a fairly new form of treatment which is not widely used. The commonest approach for lymphoma is to use the hormone injection which you had on Tuesday, this “switches off” the menstrual cycle so the ovaries are very quiet and the eggs stop developing, which is thought to shield them from chemotherapy. It has been shown to be effective in women with breast cancer but not yet in lymphoma (which is a less common illness). The injection lasts a month and needs to be repeated during chemotherapy. It can cause hot flushes but all the effects reverse when the injection is stopped. (D., 2018)

Because of the aggressive nature of my cancer, I had to settle for the injection, which had shown no efficacy in effectively preserving the fertility of cis-women with lymphoma. The needle for the injection was huge. Notably, one of my chemotherapy nurses refused to give that injection, asking a colleague to do it: the needle was “too big” for her (but not for patients like me, apparently). Every month, I gritted my teeth, lifted up my shirt and pulled down my pants dutifully to get stabbed in my abdomen. I suffered intense hot flushes and mood swings. Like pregnancy, cancer provided me with several bodily changes. My bald head would occasionally be drenched from sweat, my own version of a full moon shining through the night. “All of this, and it might not even work,” I told myself, before quickly trying to banish the thought. Perhaps I was being prophetic: currently, doctors think that I

may be going through early menopause. Because of the highly contagious variant of COVID, I can't go to the hospital to get my blood drawn in order to confirm that.

Since my experiences with infertility and fertility treatments, Dr Elizabeth Shaw's anguish at not being able to have children in *Prometheus* hits me entirely differently. There is a good chance that, like her, the only thing that my body could ever grow is something deadly. For Shaw, it was the trilobite: a tentacled, toothy alien. For me, it was my cancer, burrowed into my blood. Both of our children would have killed us, given the chance. Ours is a monstrous legacy. The wish I verbalised during my Masters was granted: I have gained the wisdom of the crone.

“Right. Well, let's talk about killing it.” (Scott, Alien, 1979)

In December, I started my first phase of cancer treatment on the solstice: chemotherapy entered my veins like winter. My case isn't typical here, either. I suffered cardiac damage as a side effect from chemotherapy (doctors insisted it was the lining of my lungs being irritated from my treatment, I countered that it wasn't. I was right). Other memoirs and autoethnographies have described the weakness, the mouth sores, the vomiting, the bloating, the incontinence. Here, I am opting to include only the highlights that I wish people had told me about before I started my treatment. These are:

- Chemotherapy side effects are real and can be permanent.
- You may have to have your big toenails permanently removed.
- Your pubic hair falls out too, and your nipple hair grows back the fastest

I was very worried about losing my hair, but was admittedly disappointed that out of all the hair I had, my nipple hair was the swiftest to return. Prior to my treatment, I had long hair for the entirety of my adult life. I had never worn it short. This changed upon diagnosis: I cut my hair short, as shorter hair is easy to deal with once it falls out. I had a legion of wigs at the

ready, to cover my (eventually) bald head, although I often found that chemotherapy simply made me too tired to put them on. I opted to not wear wigs for another reason, one that surprised even me: I didn't mind being bald. It made getting ready easy. I also ruminated on how my hair, when I had it, weighed down on upon my head. My partner supported me without hesitation, complimenting me on how pretty I looked with short hair or no hair, how brave I was, and when I became bald, how I was lucky to have a nicely-shaped head. My hair is currently growing back, and I don't think I will ever wear it as long as I used to: after all, I have all of these wigs I could wear, and then discard if I felt like it.

Treatment made me feel like the victim of a facehugger. I was alive, yet I was not. But I also garnered a nickname once my hair started to grow back: Ripley. While Sigourney Weaver and I are both tall, brown-eyed brunettes, the main reason for the nickname can be attributed to Weaver playing Ripley in *Alien 3* (1992), in which she is both bruised and bald. Bruising (Olver et al., 2018) and alopecia (baldness) (Rosman, 2004) are both common side effects of chemotherapy, but I will solely focus on the alopecia/baldness here. While chemotherapy-induced alopecia did not negatively impact me, this side effect undoubtedly adversely affects many women:

Alopecia has been cited as the most disturbing anticipated side effect by up to 58% of women preparing for chemotherapy, with 8% being at risk for avoiding treatment. Women with cancer who experience alopecia as a side effect, compared with women with cancer and no alopecia, report lower self-esteem, poorer body image, and lower quality of life. Although physicians' recommendations are the most influential factor on cancer treatment choice, body image and effects on sexuality are the next most influential factors. (McGarvey, Baum, Pinkerton, & Rogers, 2008, p. 283)

Both readily visible differences such as alopecia and bodily changes only seen by the self or intimate others caused by cancer treatment can have a negative impact on a person's psychological well-being (Reynolds & Harris, 2020). Patients also report a stigma regarding baldness (recall earlier in this chapter when a posh stranger asked me if I "had a disease or

something”). This is also found in media coverage of Ripley in *Alien 3*, including the following from a 1992 article via the *Chicago Tribune*:

The most extreme thing about this Ripley, superficially at least, is that she`s bald. In deference to the lice her character faces on the prison planet of Fiorina 161, Weaver kept her head shaved for five months on location in England, as did the rest of a cast that includes Charles Dutton and Charles Dance.

“It wasn’t my idea. It was Fincher’s idea,” says Weaver, referring to David Fincher, the film’s controversial 27-year-old director, whose prior directing experience was limited to well-regarded but decidedly shorter-form projects like Nike commercials and music videos for Madonna.

“It was actually very funny. He had just gotten the job about 20 seconds before and I was still a little nervous. We were sitting around with the Fox executives and producers and I said, ‘Well, Fincher, so how do you see the character of Ripley?’

“Fincher kind of looked at me. He`s a very funny guy and he`s very cute, too. He said, ‘So, how do you feel about being bald?’

“I looked at him and I looked at Roger Birnbaum [president of Fox`s world-wide production] and said, ‘Well, Roger, of course if I have to shave my head, I’ll have to ask for more money.’ Which, of course, made them very nervous. It was a joke,” she says, quickly....

.... Weaver`s Ripley fills the screen with her wide, dark eyes and delicately stubborn chin. She can freeze blood with a contemptuous glance and set it racing again with trembling lips in a jaw set with determination. Even bald and dressed in floppy, dun-colored prison uniforms, Ripley radiates a raw, classy coolness mingled with a bruised sensuality. (Anderson, 1992, n.pg.)

Another journalist at *Entertainment Weekly*, who was interviewing Weaver about *Alien 3* at a hotel, wrote:

She`s wearing a decidedly terrestrial, even suburban, outfit: red gingham blouse with the collar flipped up, blue slacks, plain pumps. This is Ripley? But then I notice her hair. Even though it has grown back in, it`s still short enough to hint that she`s been through something. Something trying. Like the actors who played the inmates and wardens of the prison planet Fiorina 161, Sigourney Weaver actually had her head shaved — a risk not many female (or even male) stars would take. (Kaplan, 1992, n. pg)

The journalist acknowledges that not many actors would willingly shave their heads for a role, setting Weaver apart (as well as tying into the bald stigma that cancer patients fear).

However, in the years since, in some respects it has become a badge of honour for female

actors to do this, following in the footsteps of Weaver. For example, Charlize Theron (*Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)), Anne Hathaway (*Les Misérables* (2012)), Kristen Stewart (*Underwater* (2020)), Natalie Portman (*V For Vendetta* (2005)) and Gemma Arterton (*Black Narcissus* (2020)) have all shaved their heads for roles, including, as with Hathaway and Arterton, removing their own hair live on screen. In interviews, Theron described shaving her head as “freeing” (Coggan, 2015) and certainly the bald or shaved head signals to the viewer that these characters are outsiders of some kind, as well as fierce women who have undergone (or are about to undergo) something harrowing. For example, in *Les Misérables*, Hathaway’s character Fantine shaves her head to indicate that she has become a sex worker, a role she is entering out of desperation and in which her shaved head will mark her out from other women, as a member of some sort of underclass. By contrast, in *Black Narcissus*, Arterton’s character Sister Clodagh shaves her head because that is part of the ritual by which she enters the order as a nun, a role that she has chosen (notably, Deborah Kerr did not shave her head or even remove her wimple in the 1947 film version of Rumer Godden’s novel). However, again the purpose is in some senses to place Sister Clodagh and the other nuns outside society. She is unable to access the things she desires in the valley below the mountaintop convent, placed both literally and metaphorically ‘above’ the rest of society. The final scenes of the story show Sister Ruth ‘reclaiming’ her womanhood and attempting to leave the convent, which is partly signalled by the revelation that she has secretly ceased to cut her hair.

Weaver said, in an interview that was originally published in issues 168-170 of *Starburst Magazine* in 1992:

[Shaving my head] made me feel colder... It’s amazing how much your head stays warm when you’ve got hair. So I just felt colder most of the time, and other than that, I just felt lighter... I think she felt more frail, perhaps because she had no hair, we all sort of looked like these skeletons in a way, and I felt it brought out everyone’s vulnerability... But I don’t think it made her tougher... I also noticed, while in England, that there were a lot of people avoiding me – but I guess it wasn’t usual to

see a 6 foot tall bald woman walking in the streets of London... I liked it in a way that I found it very liberating, and my husband was very supportive. He pretended to like it and then told me, after my hair had grown back, that he had hated it, while my daughter tried not to look at me. (Weaver, quoted by Valaquen, 2013)

I can confirm one of Weaver's statements: if you are a 6-foot bald woman walking the streets of London, people will indeed avoid you. Weaver doesn't make a big deal out of shaving her head and being bald. I view this as support for women like me, who do not have any choice and cannot grow our hair back. I can't imagine how I would feel if Weaver had waxed poetic about how hard it was for her to get paid millions of dollars to shave her head. However, I want to note that Weaver's husband "pretended" to be supportive, before later revealing that he hated the way she looked. Perhaps Weaver's husband should have kept his comment to himself: if my own partner told me this, I would be devastated. Notably, Weaver's daughter (who was a toddler at the time) accepted her bald head without stipulation, so much so that she wasn't used to her mother with hair once it grew back, while Weaver herself seems to have found it emancipating.

Scholars have also tackled Ripley's baldness. Janine Engelbrecht has tied Ripley's hair growing shorter and shorter over the span of the first three *Alien* films to a second wave liberal feminism strategy regarding choosing to look androgynous in order to obtain equality with men (Engelbrecht, 2020). Engelbrecht argues that Ripley's corporeal styling (one that emphasizes sexual sameness) in *Alien 3* is a fictional personification of this strategy (Engelbrecht, 2020). Describing a scene in *Alien 3* where Ripley verbally shuts down another character bragging about his prowess in raping and murdering women with a particularly devastating quip, Ilsa Bick writes, "By that one utterance, Ripley takes the traditional notion of male, phallic power in its unquestionable prerogative of aggressive penetration—and turns it on its bald head" (Bick, 1994, p. 45). Here, Bick ties Ripley's baldness into an inversion of patriarchal power. Though bald, Ripley also takes an opportunity to have consensual sex: "She

acknowledges the desires of her body and fulfills them; in exerting initiative, she exerts power, converting herself from sexual object to sexual actor” (Bach & Langer, 2010, p. 91).

However, bald or not, while Ripley does not yield to patriarchal power, she is still chained by it, as in another scene where she is not strong enough to fight off a group of would-be rapists without a sympathetic man intervening (Bach & Langer, 2010; Gallardo & Smith, 2004).

Other scholars note that Ripley’s baldness in this scene can also make her a beacon, showing how men are harmed by patriarchal power as well. Eva Daldez writes, “Even the rape attempt, given that Ripley’s appearance (just another bald prisoner in baggy clothes) and the fact that she is approached from behind, suggests male-on-male sodomy” was the intention (Daldez, 2010, p. 74).

Bald Ripley is still ripe for analysis. Understanding that, gaining the nickname “Ripley” at one of the most difficult and darkest times in my life inspired me to keep going, even when I wanted to quit.

"You've been in my life so long, I can't remember anything else." (Fincher, 1992)

After cancer, the scene in *Alien* (1979) where Ash overrides Ripley, and opens the hatch of the *Nostromo*, letting Kane and the facehugger in, again takes on an entirely new meaning to me. The reasons for this are multifold. Ash completely overriding both “the Science Division's basic quarantine law” (Scott, 1979) and Ripley’s authority reminds me of the doctors who disregarded, and wrote my symptoms off as anxiety-related. I also see myself in Kane. Whereas before I was an able-bodied woman taking care for herself, I now rely heavily on my partner, who is my registered carer. Like Kane with the xenomorph, I brought cancer into our lives, and it has, in many ways, caused upheaval and devastation. The heart damage I have from chemotherapy is permanent: this unending horror is my new normal.

In the end, I have come to the realisation that my own body can create things so terrifying that they can only be found in nightmares or outer space. Cancer never really leaves you. PTSD makes every ache and pain a cause for alarm: is this a recurrence? Is it back? I have woken up screaming from nightmares about cancer experiences, much like Ripley does in *Aliens* (1986). Currently, I am in stasis (or “Back to the old freezerinos” (Scott, *Alien*, 1979)). While little is known about my cancer, it has a high recurrence rate. With a little luck, I will remain in remission. This is Amanda, a survivor of grey zone lymphoma, signing off.

Conclusion

This study argues that Scott's work in the *Alien* and *Blade Runner* universes has shifted from an emphasis on focusing on the future, to instead focusing on what occurs in our very mortal lives. While thousands of people around the globe were dying from COVID-19, Elon Musk spoke of going to Mars, and of having a platform based on indentured servitude in order to 'help' people travel off world (McKay, 2020). Musk might as well run an advertisement seen in *Blade Runner* (1982): "A new world awaits you in the Off-world colonies. The chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure". There might be a point to make about late capitalism here, also. Lowrey writes that:

"Late capitalism," in its current usage, is a catchall phrase for the indignities and absurdities of our contemporary economy, with its yawning inequality and super-powered corporations and shrinking middle class. (Lowrey, 2017, n.pg)

Instead of a fresh start, Musk is offering potential colonists the opportunity to be indebted to him specifically, instead of another entity. If there is anything that the COVID-19 global pandemic has taught the world, it is perhaps that we are all mortal, and that corporate interests will take priority over the needs of regular people. In that way, we are all employees of Weyland-Yutani, or the Tyrell Corporation. Why postulate about the works of Scott's fictional worlds, when we are very clearly living in them in our reality? The future is now, and the future is never.

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