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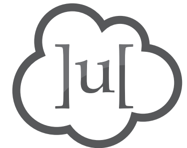

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WHAT'S LEFT? MARXISM, LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Alien and the New Enclosures

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This article examines how Ridley Scott's classic science-fiction film *Alien* (1979) both registers and anticipates the 'new enclosures', the series of dispossessions and privatisations that have wracked the globe in the last 40 years. I begin by giving an overview of these enclosures, especially the ones that pertain to *Alien*'s broad production context, such as the expansion of intellectual property rights, the privatisation of water, rampant logging in the national forests of the United States, and the destruction of public housing. I argue that David Harvey's and the autonomists' seemingly discrepant accounts of this process differ more in emphasis than in substance, and thus can be synthesised into a relatively coherent explanation for the persistence of enclosure. The rest of the article demonstrates the film's articulation with the new enclosures, which occurs at several points: not only in the characters' debates over their labour contracts, but in the corporeal appearance of non-human structures, and even the symbolic function of the alien itself. *Alien*'s diegetic universe, I conclude, is one in which the foundations of capitalism, and the terms of the capital-relation itself, are precarious or under question—one in which those terms have become legitimate objects of debate, rather than the self-evident bases of capitalist accumulation.

As an increasing body of historical and economic scholarship attests, the processes Marx placed under the heading of 'primitive accumulation', and which he saw as the precondition of capitalism, continue today in a particularly intense form. If Marx's main example in *Capital*, Volume 1 (1867) was the enclosure of English land from the late fifteenth century, today scholars can point to the expansion of intellectual property rights, the privatisation of water and other public services, the sale of the US national forests, the imposition of 'structural adjustment programmes', and the war in Afghanistan as so many 'new enclosures'—efforts to bring ever greater zones of human activity within the ambit of capitalist production. As we shall see, explanations as to why enclosure persists—is it a response to the insubordination of workers, or to impasses in the realisation of surplus-value?—differ between scholars; but that it does continue, that capitalism encloses throughout its development, is widely recognised. 'If, today, the reference to enclosures matters', Isabelle Stengers suggests, 'it is because the contemporary mode of extension of capitalism has given it all its actuality' (2015: 80).

What remains unexamined in this still-growing literature, however, is how the new enclosures find expression in the sphere of culture. Have cultural forms been able to register these new expropriations? If so, how have they represented a process that is pervasive, but whose forms of appearance are so diverse? These questions are the preoccupation of the present article, which takes Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien* as its case study. As I shall argue, *Alien* elaborates a situation where capital is overaccumulated, anxious to find profitable outlets, and must carve open new spaces for investment (this last being one of the core functions of enclosure). It depicts the employees of a giant, faceless corporation, Weylan-Yutani, arguing over the terms of their labour contracts, and foregrounds thereby the kinds of class conflict that enclosure aims to suppress. The film's corporeal aesthetic evokes the separation of what we shall call, following Marx, the 'organic body' and the 'inorganic body'—the separation of the human being from those objects necessary for its subsistence. And finally, the alien itself is comprehensible as a symbol of both capital's expansionary, colonising tendencies and of resistance to the kind of corporate rationality exhibited by Weylan-Yutani.

While *Alien* thus registers the new enclosures, it equally does not depict any really existing forms of expropriation. Released in 1979, the film gives us a glimpse of the situation to which the new enclosures would respond: a situation where the very terms of the capital-relation are under question, where struggle becomes visible and the great classes of capitalist society once again enter into open conflict. The film intuits the intensification of enclosure, that is; it uses the Nostromo as a self-sufficient site for the heightened expression of class struggle. Enclosure is therefore largely implicit in *Alien*, though it would become more overt in Hollywood science-fiction films of the 1980s: in *Blade Runner*'s (1982) vision of an enclosed Los Angeles; in *RoboCop*'s (1987) depiction of a world where medicine, incarceration, space exploration, and the police force have all been privatised; and ultimately in *Total Recall*'s (1990) image of total commodification, as the inhabitants of Mars must pay for the air they breathe, so completely have they been separated from the basic means of human subsistence.

The first section of this article will examine the new enclosures in some detail: the patenting of life forms, the ravaging of national forests, the reduction of state-subsidised housing, and the privatisation of public industries, to name just a few of the examples that pertain to the United States, and thus to *Alien*'s broad production context. Having provided an overview of the Marxist literature on the new enclosures, it will argue that certain divergences within this body of work reflect more a shift in emphasis than an irreconcilable disagreement. The article will then turn to *Alien* itself: first to its literal economic backdrop, second to its depiction of bodies, and third to the multiple meanings of the alien. It concludes that *Alien* cannot properly be understood without reference to the contexts of overaccumulation and enclosure.

Metamorphoses of Enclosure

The history of enclosure in England serves for Marx as an example of what he calls, paraphrasing Adam Smith, 'primitive accumulation': the accumulation of capital and dispossession of workers requisite to the capitalist mode of production.[1] The

[1] Marx translated Smith's 'previous' as '*ursprünglich*', which was then rendered by Marx's English translators as 'primitive'. For the context of Marx's engagement with the classical political economists and their conception of capitalism's origins, see Perelman (2000).

enclosure of English soil mostly occurred between the late fifteenth century and the early nineteenth. It proceeded fitfully at first, and often by mutual agreement, as it slowly turned arable land into pasture. The decisive shift occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century when parliament became the chief enclosing agent, legally sanctioning the expropriation of the peasantry (though we ought to note that the first bills of enclosure were passed as early as 1621) (Lesjak, n.dat.). 'Gone was the slow, negotiated process of piecemeal enclosure in which closes or woods were taken out of the system and common rights were abated by general agreement', observes J.M. Neeson. 'In its place came a process that dispensed with the need for much agreement and enclosed an entire parish in eight to ten years, and when it was done all common right had gone' (1993: 187). Between 1750 and 1830, more than 4,000 acts of enclosure came into effect (Rosenman, n.dat.).[2] 'By the nineteenth century', Marx writes, 'the very memory of the connection between the agricultural labourer and communal property had, of course, vanished' (1976: 889).

However, enclosure is not the only, or even the main, form of primitive accumulation. Marx also notes, in England, the dissolution of the bands of feudal retainers, the Reformation, and the 'glorious Revolution' at the end of the seventeenth century (1976: 878, 881–3, 884); in Scotland, the Highland Clearances (1976: 890–5); and in the imperialist context:

> [t]he discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins. (1976: 915)

A full account of these processes is outside our scope here, but suffice it to note that they all helped form, on the one hand, a landless proletariat, and on the other, a propertied capitalist class. They were the foundational moments of capitalist society.

[2] After a sharp rise in the 1760s and 1770s, parliamentary enclosure dropped in the 1780s. It returned to previous levels in the mid-1790s, and another peak followed between 1810 and 1815, after which time almost all common land had been enclosed (Yelling, 1977: 15–16).

The use of the phrase 'new enclosures' to refer to similar processes in our own time therefore involves a double displacement. Enclosure is both generalised—no longer simply one means of founding the capital-relation, it encompasses them all—and recontextualised, lifted from its 'primitive' origins and applied to the 'mature' functioning of capitalism. Indeed, virtually all recent scholarship on the new enclosures agrees that primitive accumulation is not a primitive phenomenon, that it has accompanied capitalism at every stage of its development. Views on how we ought to periodise this persistence, on what images or metaphors we should use, differ, and often depend on the scholar's basic understanding why enclosure would persist in the first place.[3] We shall turn to some of these proposed reasons later, but for now, let us simply note that the advantage of using the term 'enclosure' in this expanded sense is that it does not consign primitive accumulation to the pre-history of capital (as even Marx seems to do, at times).[4]

What forms does enclosure take at the end of the twentieth century, then? I shall try to give a sense of the new enclosures through a survey of some major examples, especially those operative in the United States since 1970, *Alien*'s broad production

[3] Peter Linebaugh argues that enclosure has proceeded in three waves: the first 'at the sixteenth century birth of the aggressive European nation-state', the second 'led by Parliament in the eighteenth century', and the third 'beginning in the late twentieth century' (2014: 4). Massimo De Angelis argues that enclosure 'acquires a continuous character dependent on the inherent continuity of social conflict within capitalist production' (2007: 141) David Harvey conceptualises enclosure as a response to periodic crises of overaccumulation; he therefore implies that enclosure is as cyclical as crises themselves (2003: 149–52). The Midnight Notes Collective initially seems to make a binary distinction between 'old' and 'new' enclosures, but goes on to argue that enclosure is 'a regular return on the path of accumulation and a structural component of class struggle', which suggests that the 'new' form of enclosure is, in fact, quite old (1990: 1). Carolyn Lesjak draws attention to the 'non-evental', piecemeal nature of enclosure, which resists easy narration, and which perhaps explains these aforementioned disagreements over the degree and form of its continuity (Lesjak, n.dat.).

[4] In Michael Perelman's charitable interpretation, Marx downplays the continuity of capitalist expropriation in *Capital* because he wants to emphasise the form of domination intrinsic to the labour process: exploitation (2000: 27–33). That Marx does not embrace the implications of the phrase 'primitive accumulation' ought to be clear, however, from his qualification '*sogennante*', rendered in English as 'so-called', such that section eight of *Capital*, Volume 1 introduces the concept as 'so-called primitive accumulation'.

context.[5] For instance, while intellectual property law has served as an enclosing mechanism since the origins of capitalism—as Vandana Shiva points out, the patent system was essential to the development of English manufacture in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (2001: 15)—its expansion from the 1980s is a distinctive feature of the present wave of enclosure (Boyle, 2008: 42–53). Examples abound, but the increasing privatisation of organic life itself is both striking and symptomatic. In 1980, during the landmark case *Diamond v. Chakrabarty*, the United States Supreme Court interpreted the genetic engineering of a microorganism as 'manufacture' and granted the first patent on life (Shiva, 2001: 41). The first mammalian patent followed eight years later, when US conglomerate DuPont modified a mouse's genes to increase its susceptibility to cancer and then claimed ownership of the animal (Shiva, 2001: 1–2). Today, patients with rare genetic diseases have tried to patent their own genomes as a defensive manoeuvre, before companies seek to own them (Bollier, 2003: 81). Isolated populations in Tonga and Iceland have already sold exclusive rights to their gene pool. 'Unlike the land enclosures Marx and Polanyi wrote about', Nancy Fraser observes, 'which "merely" marketized existing natural phenomena, the new enclosures penetrate deep "inside" nature, altering its internal grammar' (2014: 64). We might add that, in the case of patents on life, it is precisely by altering nature that individuals and companies have enclosed it.

The enclosure of other natural domains also accelerated at the end of the twentieth century. Even water is now widely defined as a commodity, a good whose exchange-value holds precedence over its use-value. The recent privatisation of the world's water supply replaces a system—practiced in both the North and the South—of small-scale trading between farmers, who treated water as a common resource (Barlow & Clarke, 2002: 73). US citizens have also seen their national forests ravaged by the advance of capital. Vast forest reserves were brought under the protection of

[5] Because of its focus on the United States and the Global North, my summary does not give a sense of the truly global scope of the new enclosures, which also include (to take just a few examples) the continued expulsion of the agricultural population from their land, the pollution of the natural environment, the war in Afghanistan, and the 'structural adjustment programmes' of the International Monetary Fund. All of these processes have served, in one way or another, to separate people from their means of production and subsistence in the last 40 years.

the US Forest Service in 1891, whose stewardship was intended to preserve the forests' 'multiple use'—not just logging, that is, but recreation, hunting, wildlife activity, and so on. However, increased demand for timber after the Second World War forced the industry to change its priorities, such that, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the national forests' non-market values became subordinate to logging and other commercial functions. As Paul W. Hirt argues, most foresters 'came to believe that their overriding purpose was not so much to protect the national forests but rather to develop their resources to meet the material needs of the American public' (1996: xxii). Logging continued at unsustainable levels through the 1960s and 1970s. Even when the overall Forest Service budget fell during Reagan's tenure, funding for the timber programme remained robust (Hirt, 1996: 268).

The continued penetration of enclosure into the sphere of reproduction is evident in changes to the housing market. Although state-subsidised housing in the United States has always been marginal, Nixon began to roll back the modest increase in public housing since 1949 with his 1974 Housing and Community Development Act (Hackworth, 2009: 237). The destruction of public housing was later formalised in the 1992 HOPE VI programme, which does not oblige authorities to replace the housing units they remove, and which has therefore caused widespread displacement and dispossession (Hackworth, 2009: 239–41). The concomitant expansion of gated communities—such that, in San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles, demand for a house in a gated community outstrips demand for other dwellings by three to one (Davis, 2006: 246)—has produced 'a tightly meshed and prisonlike geography punctuated by protective enclosures and overseen by ubiquitous watchful eyes', as Edward Soja puts it (2010: 43). The homeless and vagrant of Los Angeles meanwhile find themselves contained in Skid Row. 'The police, lobbied by Downtown merchants and developers, have broken up every attempt by the homeless and their allies to create safe havens or self-organized encampments', notes Mike Davis (2006: 234).

We could also point to the growing appetite for privatisation in American public life. Although the Reagan administration considered the prospects of privatising programmes and assets in its first term, it was not until early 1987 that the first major privatisation project took place: the government's sale of its 85 per cent stake

in Conrail, a freight rail operator (Henig, 1989: 649–50). Reagan established his Presidential Commission on Privatisation shortly after, in September 1987, and its 1988 report proposed to expand privatisation into low-income housing, air traffic control, education, and the postal service, among others. This was sometimes to be undertaken in a piecemeal fashion through the use of vouchers, and at times more comprehensively, as in its recommendation that the Naval Petroleum Reserves be completely privatised. Prior to Reagan's administration, the US government had frequently expressed its wish to contract public services out to the private sector, but in the Commission's view, this intention had 'not been applied effectively' (President's Commission on Privatization, 1988: 129). Thus it was only with Reagan that the theory of privatisation, on the one side, and its practice, on the other, were consciously brought together (Henig, 1989: 663). Subsequently, experiments in using vouchers for schooling in the United States have found limited success, and the attempted privatisation of social security has run aground (Glenn, 2011).

That enclosure remains a powerful force in American capitalism is clear, then, but why has it persisted? There are two dominant answers to this question. The first comes from David Harvey and his notion of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2001: 137–82). For Harvey, the privatisations and dispossessions that have wracked the globe in the last 40 years are best understood as a response to the 1970s economic crisis. This crisis being caused by overaccumulation—a situation where capitalists are unable to reinvest their surplus-value profitably, where they have too much capital and too few outlets for it—only the creation of new, cheap inputs can open up space for profitable investments. The sale of public assets to private companies for a fraction of their market value—national forest timber in the United States, for example, was often sold at a loss—seems a perfect example of what Harvey has in mind (Hirt, 1996: 278–81). As well as enclosures, however, Harvey argues that financialisation, regressive tax policy, and the artificial generation of local crises have also recently served as means of expropriation. Thus events as diverse as the Enron scandal, the IMF's devaluation of Jamaican currency, and the privatisation of the *ejido* in Mexico are collected together under Harvey's notion of accumulation by

dispossession (a concept whose evident capaciousness has sometimes been criticised [Brenner, 2006]).

In contrast with Harvey's analysis of the objective contradictions of capital, of blockages in the circuit of capital accumulation, Marxists working in the autonomist tradition have tended to interpret the new enclosures as a form of counterrevolution, a reactionary intervention in the class war. The 1990 essay in which the Midnight Notes Collective theorises the 'new enclosures' is exemplary here. Between 1965 and 1975, they argue, 'proletarian initiatives transcended the limits of capital's historic possibilities' (1990: 3), challenging capital to discipline its workers through enclosure. Enclosure must then be understood in its concrete effects on the class war, which, they stress, 'does not happen on an abstract board toting up profit and loss', but rather 'needs a terrain' (1990: 6). In the same vein, Massimo De Angelis argues that enclosure is a kind of 'disciplinary integration', a way of bringing into the ambit of capitalist production subjects whose 'value practices' fall outside of it (2007: 79–81). Once integrated, workers may be played off against one another, as the livelihood of one group depends on their outcompeting rival groups, the workers' struggles for survival serving as a means for capital's self-expansion.

While Harvey's and the autonomists' explanations start from different premises and develop in quite different directions, they actually present us with a false dichotomy. They describe the same process but from opposite points of view. If, to resolve crises of overaccumulation, capitalists must open up new outlets for investment—by enclosing the commons, or privatising the public—then these resolutions require people to yield their direct access to means of production or subsistence. But in such a situation, the people are not yet fully proletarianised—they maintain some bond to their means of production, which capital is presently trying to take from them—and thus the capital-relation also does not yet fully obtain. It follows that the effort to resolve crises of overaccumulation by enclosure is always, at the same time, an effort to complete the process of proletarianisation: 'disciplinary integration' is ultimately comprehensible as a strategy for resolving economic crisis. But we could also put this the other way around. Since, for the proletariat, the class

struggle aims to bring the means of production under common ownership, their victories deprive capitalists of the new, cheap outlets in which the latter would invest their overaccumulated capital. Proletarian struggle pushes capital towards economic crisis, while the resolution of those same crises is nothing but the reassertion of the capital-relation, quelling dissent. Economic crisis is immanent to the terrain of class struggle, and the choice between Harvey's and the autonomists' explanations is a false one.

Accumulation and its Discontents

My central thesis here is that *Alien* registers the return of enclosing forces, that it anticipates a situation of heightened enclosure, but this must come with the caveat that its mode of reference is indirect. While the film does not obviously represent any of the specific examples of enclosure noted above, its diegetic universe is nevertheless one in which the foundations of capitalism, and the terms of the capital-relation itself, are precarious or under question—one in which those terms have become legitimate objects of debate, rather than the self-evident bases of capitalist accumulation. Indeed, for Marx, primitive accumulation precedes the naturalisation of capitalist social relations, the 'primitive' proletarian consciousness being more aware of its condition, and of the violence foundational to that condition, than the 'mature' one. Capitalism must produce a working class, Marx writes, 'which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws' (1976: 899). This naturalisation is an integral part of the project of primitive accumulation itself; it is the ideological concomitant to the material processes of separation and dispossession. In the context of the new enclosures, then, we should not be surprised to find that *Alien* registers a slippage in capital's self-evidence. As I shall try to suggest in this section, it depicts tensions in the structure of social relations that support capitalism—tensions that the new enclosures will be called upon to eliminate.

A brief plot summary should at least begin to suggest the utility of the Marxist framework, broadly considered, to analysis of the film.[6] Sometime in the early twenty-

[6] For examples of Marxist approaches to *Alien*, see Byars et al. (1980) and Byers (1990).

second century, British-Japanese corporation Weylan-Yutani detects a distress signal from outer space and, presuming that the signal implies an alien encounter of some kind, sends one of its commercial transport vehicles, the Nostromo, to investigate. The company aims to contain an alien in the Nostromo and bring it back to Earth for analysis, possibly to deploy it as a weapon, as a means of defending its economic interests in a now-interstellar sphere of commodity production and circulation. The process of capture is likely to kill or injure the crew, so it is important that the relevant employees remain unaware of the precise nature of their task. To keep them in the dark, Weylan-Yutani programs the Nostromo's mainframe, known as 'Mother', to hide the key details from its captain. It also swaps the crew's science officer for an android, Ash, whose job it is to inspect the alien, but also (perhaps more importantly) to ensure the crew's complicity. On examining the derelict spacecraft from which the signal emanates, Kane, one of the Nostromo's crew, is attacked, and an alien embryo is implanted in him. Shortly after Kane and the other explorers return to the ship, an alien bursts through Kane's stomach, grows into a horrifying creature, and hunts the rest of the crew. Only Ripley survives: she blows up the Nostromo and its cargo, ejects the alien into outer space, and escapes in the ship's shuttle.

It is the sheer scale of the Nostromo's journey that first alerts us to the spectre of economic crisis hanging over *Alien*. Contrasting with the claustrophobic interior spaces of the Nostromo—which seem just too small for comfortable living—is an almost unimaginable expansion of the sphere of commodity circulation, whose interstellar exchanges dwarf today's mere international flows of global capital. The Nostromo's journey is so long, its trajectory so vast, that it is incommensurable with the scale of human experience (so as not to waste their entire lives in space, the crew of the Nostromo must enter 'stasis', a form of human hibernation, for months or years at a time). What is important for us is that this scalar extrapolation is itself a symptom of capitalism's tendency to overaccumulate. As Harvey argues, drawing partly from Rosa Luxemburg, capitalism's crises force it to move outwards—to penetrate and enclose new regions, increase foreign trade, export itself—because it thereby generates more effective demand, renewing the conditions of further accumulation (2001: 241–2). If capital subsumes ever greater tracts of the globe—or, as in *Alien*, the galaxy—this is

to be seen as a mark not of its success, but of its failure, and of the lengths it must go to postpone terminal crisis.

Meanwhile, the property relations obtaining on the Nostromo remain implicit, revealed ambiguously at certain moments in the film. The first thing to note is that the wage now seems to assume, at least in part, the form of shares: the workers' 'bonus' is ownership of Weylan-Yutani. The crew appear to have some degree of control, even if it is minimal, over the use of the company's means of production.[7] That being said, the social relations between the crew and the company remain deeply reminiscent of the capital-relation. That the company can threaten the 'total forfeiture of shares' (though it turns out to be a lie), and that this threat ensures the workers' complicity, implies the existence of the quasi-objective structure of interdependence that Moishe Postone (1993) identifies with capitalism. Also relevant here is Dallas's jubilant announcement, after Kane's revival, that he is buying dinner (Dallas is the captain of the Nostromo). Taken literally, Dallas's offer implies that the food aboard the Nostromo is not communal, that each member usually buys their own portion. This would be a sign of heightened enclosure, the workers being so utterly separate from their subsistence that they must buy food even while in their place of production. It is also possible to read Dallas's comment as a joke, however, and thus to conclude that Weylan-Yutani duly provides the crew's means of subsistence. As such, capital exists in the representational space of *Alien* mainly as a social relation, and only ambiguously as a property relation.

Yet *Alien* also depicts the instabilities of that social relation; it stages class conflict through its characters' debates on the labour contract. In the opening moments of the film, there is little to suggest division or seniority: we watch the crew wake up as if from birth, wearing identical clothes in identical hypersleep containers. We watch them sit around a circular table, a table with no head, and eat, talk, and joke as equals. This blissful, prelapsarian state ends shortly after, when

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[7] The film leaves the size and source of this bonus unclear: is it a share of the company's profits, or rather a share of the profit made on that trip alone? And how much influence would the workers really have in the day-to-day running of Weylan-Yutani?

Parker and Brett, the ship's engineers, bring up the inequitable 'bonus situation' and claim their right to receive 'full shares'. Dallas responds, 'You get what you're contracted for, like everybody else'. The issue of the labour contract returns later when it transpires that the crew are unaware of their obligation to investigate the derelict spacecraft's help signal. Ash claims to Parker that failure to investigate entails a forfeiture of all shares, but after Parker attacks Ash, the crew learn that he lied, that they were not obliged, in fact. Ash lies simply to ensure that the crew follows the company's wishes. It becomes clear that the labour contract has been used, not as the basis of transparent understanding between two free individuals, but as the opposite: a form of coercion, a means of exercising class power. The contract itself is irrelevant: its purported content merely serves as cover for the company's more sinister motives.[8]

Alien therefore denaturalises the capital-relation in both its non-narrative background (its setting in an expanded sphere of circulation) and in its narrative foreground (its depiction of confrontations between different class fractions aboard Nostromo). It imagines, first, the lengths to which capital must go in order to forestall or resolve crises of overaccumulation, and second, the precariousness of the capital-relation. This is the objective situation in which enclosure—conceived as an ongoing process, not merely as 'primitive' accumulation—intervenes. As for the place of enclosure itself, I have already noted that it does not appear literally in the film's narrative content. Rather, it finds expression in *Alien*'s corporeal aesthetic. The film's portrayal of bodily process as such, I shall argue in the next section, is comprehensible only in the context of the separation of the humans from nature, which the young Marx sought to grasp with his concept of the 'inorganic body'.

[8] Marx notes that, within the ethical horizon of capitalism, the capitalist is as entitled to claim surplus-value as the labourer is to demand full payment for their work. This is because the capitalist, having purchased the commodity labour-power, is able to use it for as long as they like, while the labourer, as the seller of that commodity, may just as reasonably demand that it be employed only for the length of a normal working day. 'There is here therefore an antinomy, of right against right'—Weylan-Yutani against the workers—'both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. Between equal rights, force decides' (1976: 344).

The body horror of *Alien* is not just that of sheer corporeal mutilation, but of its objectification, the ontological disseverance of the body from the subject.[9]

Enclosure and the Inorganic Body

In his 1844 manuscripts, Marx recasts the relationship between human and nature as one between an organic and an inorganic body:

> Just as plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc., theoretically form a part of human consciousness, partly as objects of science and partly as objects of art … so too in practice they form a part of human life and human activity. In a physical sense man lives only from these natural products, whether in the form of nourishment, heating, clothing, shelter, etc. The universality of man manifests itself in practice in that universality which makes the whole of nature his *inorganic* body, (1) as a direct means of life and (2) as the matter, the object and tool of his life activity. Nature is man's *inorganic body*, that is to say nature in so far as it is not the human body. Man *lives* from nature, i.e. nature is his *body*, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature. (1975: 327–8)

It follows from this that, when labour becomes alienated from itself, when it becomes commodified as labour-power, it 'estranges man from his own body, from nature as it exists outside him, from his spiritual essence, his *human* essence' (Marx, 1975: 327). Capitalism divides nature, unlinks it from itself, and the point of separation is the human body. This split is nothing less than the prime object of enclosure, which separates humans from 'these natural products', in which Marx includes not just food but also 'heating, clothing, shelter etc.', the 'inorganic' organs of human life.

[9] For a recent analysis of body horror in *Alien*, see Cruz (2012). Philip Brophy's seminal article on 'horrality' places *Alien* at the forefront of a new kind of horror cinema and identifies body horror as one of the latter's constitutive features (Brophy, 1986).

The external separation of people from their means of subsistence creates a parallel separation internal to the human subject, the body itself riven by enclosure.

It seems to me that *Alien* offers us several images of the inorganic body, and dramatises thereby the estrangement of the human subject from the body under enclosure. A particularly vivid example is the anthropoid derelict spacecraft. Its dark, slimy inner walls, faintly ribbed, are reminiscent of the human oesophagus or intestine; and the cave to which these tubes lead recalls the human stomach (though the presence of alien eggs there also implies some fusion of reproduction and digestion, which recurs when the alien bursts through Kane's stomach). Evoking a human body of greatly expanded proportions, the architecture of the craft itself appears to be the work of evolution, of some extra-human agency analogous to, and thus symbolic of, capital (one of whose definitions is 'self-valorising value'). This substitution of biology for architecture reconstructs the body as something inherently tubular, empty, permeable, and leaky—as something spatial, something with a certain depth and volume, such that the body itself comes to seem external and strange.[10] We can also note this extrapolated evolutionary progress in the skeletal figure decaying in the spacecraft (itself the victim of a chestburster), who is several times larger than the *homo sapiens* inspecting him.

The Nostromo, too, is like an organism, though the resemblance seems much weaker, at least at first. The initial establishing shots of *Alien* depict the Nostromo as a quadruped stalking nomadically through the universe. Its doors are so many sphincters, controlling exit and entry through its tunnels. This zoomorphism also extends to the film's audio track: the sound of the Nostromo's engines is in fact a synthesised heartbeat (Delson, 2005: 30). Yet as soon as the alien enters the Nostromo, the ship is fated to deteriorate, to become derelict, like the one the crew leave to explore (the Nostromo's self-destruction at the end of the film is then best understood as a last-ditch attempt to resist this destiny). The Nostromo is bound,

[10] The corporeal appearance of walls in the derelict spacecraft is raised to a higher power in James Cameron's sequel, *Aliens* (1986), where the aliens are able to surprise their attackers because they have become part of the walls.

in other words, to become an inorganic body, a host for the alien species, providing *its* means of subsistence and shelter. While the ship presents us with an image of supreme control over human life—it is a space where humanity has managed to arrest the process of ageing (in its hypersleep containers), almost to tame nature itself—this ends when the alien comes aboard.

Here my reading departs from Kristevan interpretations of *Alien*, which emphasise the abject, interstitial nature of the bodily processes represented in the film. For Kristeva (1982), the abject inhabits an oblique interspace between subject and object; it threatens their border and cannot be reduced to one or the other. Deploying Kristeva alongside Freud, Barbara Creed argues that the alien is a 'fetish-object of and for the archaic mother', the parthenogenetic mother who threatens patriarchy and symbolises death, and who finds expression in the film's various primal scenes (1993: 17). Catherine Constable elaborates these Kristevan elements in Creed's reading: Constable suggests that '*Alien* offers a representation of the human as a sterile community forcibly confronted by a physicality it has rejected' (1999: 184). In my reading, however, the film's bodily structures—the derelict spacecraft and the Nostromo—are conspicuously external and objective. They are so many visions of an *inorganic* body, separate from humans, outside of human control. They represent an estranged body, a body alienated from humanity by enclosure. The subject-object divide is established, even reified, in the corporeal spaceships, not challenged.

Perhaps the exception to this discussion of *Alien*'s bodies is the body of the alien itself, which seems to fuse with the film's mise en scène, melting into the darkness. Its strange and uncertain corporeality is partly what makes it terrifying, but it also bears on the alien's symbolism, which forms the object of this article's final section. On the one hand, I shall suggest, the alien represents the culmination of capital's disciplinary force; on the other, it signifies resistance to that force. It embodies capital, but it also disrupts the corporation's plans. The alien's horror does not distract from the social commentary established earlier in debates over the labour contract; it rather externalises this conflict, gives it visceral expression.

Resistance

For Jeff Gould, 'the Alien is the double, we might say the *biological analogue*, of the Company' (in Byars et al., 1980: 283)—and thus, we ought to add, of capital itself. The alien boards the ship, contrary to Ripley's efforts; it accords with the company's judgement that the crew is expendable; and it entrenches divisions amongst the crew. Yet the alien is also *symbolically* on the side of capital. I have already suggested that the evolutionary register of *Alien* is to be taken, not literally—as the revenge of nature on humanity—but rather metaphorically, the evolutionary process evoking capital as an extra-human force. It follows that the penetration of the alien (which Ash calls 'the perfect organism', depicting the alien as the highest achievement of natural selection) into the environment of the Nostromo is to be understood as the symbolic penetration of capital into the world of living labour. Devouring the crew, the alien materialises the process by which the capitalist 'devours the labour-power of the worker, or appropriates his living labour as the life-blood of capitalism', as Marx puts it (Marx, 1976: 1007; cf. Neocleous, 2003, on Marx's vampiric imagery). The alien succeeds Marx's famous images of vampires and werewolves as the prime animal incarnation of capital.

Yet this equation of the alien with capital is insufficient, as it also seems to embody a certain resistance to capital, to the company's disciplinary operations. For a start, the alien's entry to the Nostromo serves as a narrative pretext for abolishing the division of labour aboard the Nostromo. As the alien enters, and as the crew are forced apart from one another, their internal hierarchy is flattened, social imperatives overridden by a universal survival instinct. Read this way, the alien-character appears as a device for eliminating hierarchy, for exploding the terms of the labour contract, and thus for giving body to the contractual dispute between the manual workers and the senior crew. Its entry does not divert from the social commentary earlier in the film, but serves as the heightened form of its expression.

The alien's symbolic relationship to the workers, meanwhile, derives from the broader significance of darkness in the film. When the crew search for the alien, Ripley says that she thought Parker and Brett had fixed 'twelve module', an area

in the Nostromo where the lights are not working. Brett replies, 'We did. I don't understand it', and Parker suggests that the electric circuits 'must've burned out'. Of course, Ripley's comment is not to be taken at face value: she suspects that Parker and Brett have not fully carried out their duties. This is a crucial moment in the film's symbolism, where suddenly light and dark spaces take on socio-political meaning—or rather, the intrinsically political character of lighting now comes to the surface. We remember that, in the opening section of *Alien*, just before the crew wakes up, the Nostromo turns its lights back on. The lighting is therefore linked, from the film's inception, to the company's need for energy efficiency, implicitly for profit maximisation. It is precisely by tampering with this conspicuously functional aspect of the Nostromo's lighting that Parker and Brett introduce a symbolic one, where the darkness evokes the workers' background resistance to the dehumanising and debilitating effects of capital accumulation.

Once we establish this link between darkness and dissent, it becomes clear how the alien embodies resistance to capital's discipline. The alien seems to belong organically to darkness—not in the mundane sense that it is evil, but rather in the sense that the darkness is its body, or conversely, that it is the body of the darkness. The dark spaces of the Nostromo before the crew awake conjure the terrible prospect of a post-human future (cf. Benson-Allott, 2015): as viewers, we see what the characters cannot, since as soon as they are awake, the lights are on. The darkness of this post-human future is, of course, what the alien also threatens, and indeed achieves, insofar as it strands Ripley, cutting her loose from human society. Additionally, when we see the alien (and until the end, we see it only partially), its body melts into the darkness of its surroundings: it lifts the silent objectivity, even naturalism, of the mise en scène into a symbolic realm of heightened drama and meaning. The alien is therefore the corporeal expression of the ship's mise en scène. It is the Nostromo's dark space stepping forward in animal form.

This last meaning, the alien as an embodiment of resistance, finds expression on the screen through anamorphosis. The alien's short life is one of constant change: every time we see it, we notice different body parts; new and terrifying features appear. It nevertheless remains unclear whether these changes are mutations in the

object itself (the alien's body is maturing) or whether it has to do with the position of the viewing subject (the different angles and distances from which we see the alien, and how it is lit, determine which parts are visible). In this impossible interpretive situation—does the shift occur in the object or the subject?—we can say only that the alien is anamorphic, that this perceptual distortion is the essence of its being. It is as if the alien takes the space of the Nostromo—a disciplinary space, which permits or prohibits crew members' access to particular areas on the basis of their seniority—and bends it around itself, thus posing a symbolic challenge to the architecture that maintains Weylan-Yutani's control. Insofar as these doors, corridors, and barriers exert disciplinary force, keeping the crew's (and thus the company's) internal hierarchy intact, the alien exists as some absolute limit to corporate domination, and to the subsumption of ever greater zones of human (and non-human) existence under the logic of capital.[11] The alien accords with some of Weylan-Yutani's wishes, as Gould argues, but it also seems to embody what the company and capital cannot control.

Alien thus occupies itself in no small measure with both the persistence of enclosure and the conditions to which enclosure itself responds. As we have seen, it imagines an interstellar capitalism whose scale attests to the existence of crises of overaccumulation; it dramatises debates over the labour contract, implicitly over the terms of the capital-relation; it depicts an inorganic body dissevered from the organic; and finally it deploys the alien ambivalently, as an embodiment of capital and of resistance to capital. Although *Alien* does not literally or directly represent any real instances of enclosure—the expansion of intellectual property rights, the privatisation of water, the expropriation of land, the reduction of public

[11] For Marx, the 'real subsumption' of capital refers specifically to capital's ability to alter the form of the labour process (1976: 1023–5, 1034–8). But aboard the Nostromo, capital's subsumption goes even further; it seems to engulf the employees' entire lives (hence, they must hibernate when not working, when not useful to the company). This is closer to Hardt and Negri's expanded use of the term 'real subsumption'. For them, what is subsumed is not merely labour, or the production process, but society itself: 'with the real subsumption of society under capital, social antagonisms can erupt as conflict in every moment and on every term of communicative production and exchange. Capital has become a world' (2000: 386).

housing—such acts find expression in particular through the film's visions of estranged bodies, alien and separate (whose function cannot then be reduced to the exhibit of body horror). *Alien* demands this historical and materialist treatment. Its narrative, aesthetics, and symbolism cannot properly be understood without reference to the tectonic shifts occurring in its socio-economic context: the return and intensification of enclosure.

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