

# Jaws Within Jaws: A Cosmopolitical Ecology of *Alien*

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## Abstract

This article investigates multi-species relations in a group of science fiction narratives featuring extraterrestrial beings, paying particular attention to the *Alien* movie series. The concept of "cosmopolitical ecology" is elaborated as a tool to map relations between the different kinds of beings that populate the modern imagination in SF, especially those between humans, machines, animals and alien entities. Two apparently opposing modes of relation are highlighted in the narratives: domestication and predation. But those modes, intrinsically connected to a broader colonial imaginary, seem to be themselves entangled in complex ways. If modernity is marked by what Ghassan Hage calls "generalized domestication," then what is the place of predation in modern metaphysics? An ambiguous position often attached to a dangerous other, the role of the predator also emerges as a feature of modern humans, a trace that they sometimes recognize in themselves when they look at an alien mirror.

Keywords: science fiction; predation; domestication; cosmopolitics.

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So much has been written about the *Alien* series of movies that it would be tempting to think that there is nothing more to be said about it. The monstrous alien — with its utterly strange appearance, its eerie mode of reproduction, its unbeatable predatory, ferocious qualities, and astonishing adaptability — has been described as representing the monstrous-feminine (Creed 2007), the imperatives of nature (Mulhall 2008, 17), and the deconstructing monster of difference (Gerbet 2014), to mention a few interesting readings of the films. However, it may be exactly in this proliferation of meaning that the appeal of the series remains. The creature of *Alien* is a powerful mediator (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 224; or in the sense of Latour 1993, 78) or assemblage converter (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 325), making possible the translation of different codes into one another: the codes of reproduction, predation, and gender relations in particular are treated cohesively, resonating together through a thick network of interconnections.

In this article, I investigate multi-species relations featured in a group of science fiction variations on the theme of the alien Other.<sup>1</sup> I draw here a few sketches of a map of what could be called, inspired by Isabelle Stengers' "cosmopolitics," a "*cosmopolitical ecology*": a network of associations involving some basic figures of modern human alterity (namely animals, machines, and aliens). I call this network an ecology because the intention is to elicit interactions between animated beings — even if those interactions take place in speculated milieus. This ecology should be understood as "cosmopolitical" so it remains open for the diversity of entities that we must take into consideration here, resisting two simultaneous tendencies that commonly affect the notions of politics and cosmos. First, cosmopolitics avoids the inclination of politics to designate a sphere of only-human affairs, a specific set of relations that excludes, for example, the field of science or technology. And, second, it avoids the tendency of *cosmos* to mean "a finite list of entities" (Latour 2004, 454); those same things that are usually taken as the object of science, but also the kinds of beings that populate fictional narratives, or even myth.<sup>2</sup>

"Cosmos" here refers to the unknown constituted by "multiple, divergent worlds, and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable" (Stengers 2005, 995). This cosmopolitical ecology, which includes mechanical beings, resonates with Yuk Hui's suggestion of a *political ecology of machines* (2020, 54), although the technodiversity involved here builds on imaginary technologies that interact in multiple ways with biological entities, and with certain liminal beings that inhabit undecidable gaps between the living and the non-living.

This cartography of multi-specific relations involving extraterrestrial beings keeps a particular focus on relations of *domestication* and *predation*. Ghassan Hage's concept of *generalized domestication* will provide important guidance in this quest. I will discuss most centrally the *Alien* tetralogy, one of the best known and widely debated versions of our central theme. One particular question will trouble us throughout the article and will be directly addressed in the final pages: what is the place of predation in modern

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<sup>1</sup> Methodologically, the science fiction narratives investigated here are considered to be a "group of transformations," in the way proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his mythological analyses (Almeida 1990, Descola 2016, Maniglier 2016, Viveiros de Castro 2012). SF narratives are interconnected in many different and unexpected ways. They are versions of each other, elaborating differently on the same themes. Another way to describe this same aspect, more directed to science fiction, is presented by Donna Haraway's concept of SF as *string figures* (2016a).

<sup>2</sup> See Schrempp (2011, 2018) for intriguing relations between science and myth. I am treating SF as yet another kind of modern mythology, or mythophysics (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017). While the procedure described by Schrempp involves the "infusion" of scientific ideas with mythological images and metaphors, SF performs the experiment of treating scientific frameworks or ideas as pieces of a mythological *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss 1962), and presents them as fictional stories.

metaphysics?<sup>3</sup> In this paper I shall be using the term metaphysics to refer to the set of basic questions that underlie modernity's conceptions of what constitutes reality, and the place of humans in relation to other beings that populate the cosmos. I will show how the role of the predator, an ambiguous position often attached to a dangerous other, also emerges as a feature of modern humans, a trace that they sometimes recognize in themselves when they look at an *alien* mirror.

### Domesticating predation

Noting the many areas of similarity between the ecological crisis and the crisis expressed in Islamophobia, the anthropologist Ghassan Hage argues that it is in the concept of *generalized domestication* that "the most fundamental generative structures of both racism and speciesism can be found" (Hage 2017, 15). A mode of inhabiting the world, generalized domestication is not about domesticating this or that species, but one's whole environment. The purpose is to yield value: "material or symbolic forms of sustenance, comfort, aesthetic pleasure, and so on" (87). In the way Hage develops the concept, no primacy is given to the domestication of animals over that of other beings, humans included. Generalized domestication is in the background, so to say, of every relation of "white modernity" to any kind of Other; this is why it articulates racism and the environmental crisis as part of the same deep, structural problem.

Contemporary racism, Hage states, is often marked with an ambivalent sign, as if always in panic that it will fail in its intention to govern racialized bodies. It is a racism in crisis:

The crisis is when racism fails to do its governmental job. It is when a slave or a colonized person refuses to work, or to accept his or her dehumanization, or refuses to "know his or her place," and so on, that racism is in crisis. We can say that American anti-black racism carries a trace of crisis within it since the abolition of slavery. (29)

The creature of *Alien* shares with the colonial imaginary of the Muslim that Hage brings into focus the feature of *ungovernability*. For the case of the Muslim other, this trace is related to the incapacity of present sociopolitical structures to contain, on one hand, the mobility of these neo-colonized populations across national borders, and, on the other, to govern their social or cultural assimilation into national spaces. Uncontainable and impossible to integrate, the "Muslim" emerges in the racist imaginary as a "wolfish" threat or as disposable "cockroaches" (Hage, 46).

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<sup>3</sup> In the background of this discussion is the "metaphysics of predation" that lies in the core of Amerindian cosmologies, as the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has repeatedly shown; a summary of the issue can be found in his "Cannibal Metaphysics" (Viveiros de Castro 2014). What follows is an implicit dialogue with this idea, trying to figure out how predation, a figure that is not at all central to modern ontology, still plays a role in this group of ecological relations involving humanity and its Others.

As for the alien, ungovernability is inscribed in its uncontrollable, dangerous body. The repetitive nature of the failed endeavors of humans to domesticate the aliens underlines this trace. The ungovernable is an object that defies the Moderns' aspiration to subject it to their power, an "other that continuously threatens our desire to feel in control of our environment" (81). The unsurmountable aggressiveness of the aliens makes them immune to humans' techniques of governmentality. Their uncanny, mysterious biology sets them completely out of control — surviving the aliens, as Ellen Ripley insists over and over again in each episode, depends strictly on exterminating them.

As a particular kind of relation to alterity, predation is opposed to domestication in that it does not give room for a controlled reproduction in captivity of what is preyed on. Predation is, in modern metaphysics, usually associated with non-human beings (such as predatory animals), but also with human uncontrolled consumption and environmental degradation, with hunting and warfare. Although tolerated under certain conditions (when regarded as a necessary byproduct of capitalist accumulation), uncontrolled predation is generally seen as irrational, due to its potential for environmental destruction.

As Nayanika Mathur remarks (2016), in the times of the Anthropocene predation operates in a dual sense: the preying of a living being upon another, as well as the act of looting. Writing on the steady increase in cases of big cats and bears preying on humans in the Indian Himalaya, Mathur notes the emergence of two sets of narratives that aim at explaining the occurrence. On one side, state officials link the attacks directly to climate change. Winter snowfalls have historically pushed leopards from the highest regions of the Himalaya; resource degradation, biodiversity depletion, and species extinction exacerbated by climate change now deprive them of their usual prey, and they turn to humans. As for the bears, the higher temperatures would drive them "mad" and inclined to inexplicable acts of violence towards their human neighbors. On the other side, local inhabitants insist on a narrative of "mutual predation": they say that rivers, mountains, soil, and even the gods are (as they have been before) furious at humans for their destruction of the region, expressed in localized "practices of animal poaching and trafficking, deforestation, resource extraction, mining, damming of rivers, incessant construction, and the commercialization of all domains of life that have depleted the Himalaya" (Mathur). The rising numbers of animals attacking humans are another example of the counter-predatory manifestations of this fury.

The *Alien* movies seem to put on stage a tension between domestication and predation. At first sight, domestication is opposed to predation. But, from the point of view of the alien creatures, predation encompasses domestication: the creation of their domestic environment is dependent on them preying on other beings. Their nests are partly built with the bodies of their victims, supported by a resin that the aliens secrete, like hard spider webs. The alien creature's worlding is defined by predation. This is inscribed in its body, by its characteristic mouth — the predatory organ in its essence. It cannot be by chance that the alien's mouth is doubled. These jaws within jaws, as Bessis (2014, 54) remarks, could be fractally multiplied, and one would then imagine that there is an infinite number of jaws within each other, performing a gaping and incomprehensible act of eating.

Hage's concept of generalized domestication helps us to understand how modernity conceives its own practices of othering and of governing alterity. Domestication clearly plays a central role in this. But looking carefully at the apparently simple opposition between domestication and predation, in the way it appears in contemporary SF imaginary, may allow us to complicate the matter a bit further. Not only does the creature of *Alien* produce its own kind of domestication through predation, but, as I intend to show, the humans of the series — and of other SF stories that transform aspects of it — become predators just as they proceed in their quest of domesticating the cosmos. Even though the two relations remain distinct in several aspects, predation and domestication may encompass, produce or reveal each other: preying is a step in domesticating; and if you domesticate predation, you may become a predator yourself.

### **A mechanical predator**

Anyone with a minimum of familiarity with the world of popular movies has certainly become acquainted with this strange creature which hides in its egg, lying on the floor of a desolate planet, in some forgotten corner of the galaxy. Among other eggs of the same kind, it waits for its prey, be it animal or human, to jump onto its victim and hug their face with its two rows of four articulated arms each, wrapping its long tail around their neck. In so doing, the creature inserts an organ through the throat and implants an embryo into the chest of the prey. The victim stays in a coma during the process, which can take from a few minutes to several hours.

After the implantation is successful, though, the creature loses its grip and crawls away, dying rapidly. Inside the body of the victim — who seems completely recovered, with normal vital signs — the embryo grows into a not yet fully developed, small version of its adult form. When ready to be born, it bursts out through its bearer's flesh and bones, leaving the carcass behind and searching for refuge in narrow holes or passages. At this point, the creature will grow very quickly in size; in its final shape, it is usually taller than an adult human being. Now the creature is all set to start hunting for new prey, killing them, or bringing them alive to be impregnated by other eggs of its species.

Ridley Scott's *Alien*, the 1979 movie that marks the first public appearance of such an alien being, tells the story of a mining spaceship's crew struggling to survive after an encounter with it. The movie's leading character, Ellen Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver, has been described as "one of the bravest and most badass protagonists in film history" (Ewing and Decker 2017, 3). And yet, the two women in the team of seven astronauts, Ripley and Lambert, urge the others to be careful with the unknown menace, even before they know how destructive it will be. But the men of the crew are as brave — and hierarchically superior — as they are stupid, and the alien finds in the *Nostramo* spaceship an ideal hunting ground. Ripley and Jones, the ship's cat, will be the only survivors of this encounter.

This alien creature's worlding takes predation as a central mode of articulating an environment for itself. It seems to relate to other beings only by preying on them. The aliens prey not only to feed as other known predators do but also to reproduce themselves

— for that, they need to capture and impregnate bodies of other species. In one of the most central scenes of the movie, the science specialist of *Nostromo*, Ash, is interrogated by other members of the crew after being disclosed as an android and a traitor, who was working under secret orders of the corporation that owns the ship to bring the alien back to Earth, at the expense of the human crew. Showing admiration for the alien creature, he defines it as “a perfect organism.” “Its structural perfection,” he continues, “is matched only by its hostility.” This “perfection” means that the alien is a “hard-to-beat” predator, but also that its biological properties are all, from the point of view of an intelligent machine, well “designed.” Each detail of the alien contributes to its predatory potential; it is, indeed, the perfect predator.

At a first look, we would probably classify this alien creature as an animal, by standards of the modern biological taxonomy (although, perhaps, a new biological realm or kingdom would need to be created to contain it). Yet the alien's appearance is also mechanical, and it merges well with the pipes, chains, and curves of the spaceship where the movie takes place. As noted by Martin (2014, 37), the alien is “organic in its mode of reproduction and mechanic in its power, hybridizing the vital sphere of the carbon with the inorganic of the silicon.” It does not seem gratuitous, then, that the narrative of *Alien* features machines (Ash, the android, and Mother, the computer) and a non-human animal (Jones, the cat) as important secondary characters, that present in a “pure” way what the alien embodies in a hybrid form.

The beings that populate *Alien* can be divided into two series, corresponding to mechanical and biological entities. On one side, we have Ash and the artificial intelligence that controls the ship, named Mother; they are in service of the Weyland-Yutani company, whose secret agenda includes experimenting with the aliens, domesticating them, and using them as biological weapons – a plan that will repeatedly fail in every chapter of the series. We could say that the mega-corporation is itself a kind of disembodied machine. The crew of *Nostromo*, on the other side, fighting for its survival, is more closely related to the figure of the cat. As living entities, the humans and the cat (but also the aliens) are opposed to the machines, which are not imbued with a “survival instinct”: Ash dies smiling, and Mother is set for self-destruction by Ripley.

However, the alien remains in the middle of the two series: it is a membrane between those realms, communicating with both sides. Like a virus, the alien is situated somewhere between the living and the non-living. And like a dangerous virus, its reproduction depends on it contaminating a living being, which it nevertheless kills without remorse. “I admire its purity,” Ash goes on. “A survivor. Unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality.”

The cat is, of course, a companion to Ripley, sharing affection with her and the other members of the space crew in their crossings of barren outer space. But in the mining spaceships of tomorrow, as in the ships of yesterday, having a cat around can also be a useful protection against the proliferation of mice and other pests. In a way, as a domesticated predator Jones provides a previewed image of what Weyland-Yutani aims to do with the alien creature.

Other SF movies also picture domestic animals as more or less important secondary characters. They may, for example, be put in a position to sense the danger of alien beings whose extraterrestrial nature remains hidden, as does the dog in *Village of the Damned* (George Sanders, 1960). In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), the humanity of the main characters (then pretending to be aliens) is revealed by the scream of Becky as she sees a dog that is about to be hit by a car. In *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982) and *Alien 3* (David Fincher, 1992), dogs are contaminated by alien creatures (in the first case, by assimilation, and, in the second, by impregnation) and turn from domesticated companions into a menace to humans. The cat Orion, in *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997), holds in its belt the tiny galaxy that is searched for by the Bugs, hiding it from the greed of these despicable aliens.

The existential territory occupied here by domesticated animals is linked to deeply rooted modern values of interspecies relationships. It has often been observed how moderns are used to thinking of themselves as the “masters of creation.” As Anna Tsing remarks, “Science has inherited stories about human mastery from the great monotheistic religions” (2012, 144). Here, human exceptionalism is not only a question of distinctiveness but also a question of hierarchy. We could say that the modern model of interspecies relation is asymmetrical domestication; what cannot be domesticated, like the creature of *Alien*, is probably a horrendous threat. Or it may as well belong to the realm implied by the generic category of the “wilderness” (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017, 23), which subsumes a certain kind of *negative* relation: either an absence of relation or the relational danger represented by “wild creatures.” The *Alien* films tell the story of reiterated efforts by Earth's economic powers to capture and tame this wild alien, extracting military value from it.

In the series, as in many other SF narratives, space is depicted as a new frontier in the continual expansionism of capitalism. It sets a new ground for what Marx called *original accumulation*. Not by chance, we are inhabiting a mining spacecraft. In a broad modern imaginary, the frontier, be it the old North American West or the Amazon, is the place of the Other par excellence, filled with the fascination and horror of the unknown. But it is also the place where unexplored richness abounds to be captured by a capitalist enterprise, where pre-domesticated entities proliferate as invitations for renewed appropriation and domestication. Outer space is the synonym of a space that is out of human control from a contemporary point of view. Or at least it is a place inhabited by entities not-governed-yet or not-governed-at-all (Hage 2017, 79); the place where any kind of Other, including ungovernable ones, can be found.

### **The colonizer's taste**

Writing about the common “fantasies of reversal” that populate the 19<sup>th</sup> century imaginary of colonialism — of which H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* is the best example — Hage notes how “those same fantasies of reversal have also been part of the history of domesticating nature. Here too we have a long record of worrying that what we have dominated and exploited will rise against us and domesticate us in turn” (2017, 74). However, in the case of the relation between the creature of *Alien* and the human

corporation, it is clear that “the way is not the same in both directions” (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 115): while the company persists in its attempt to capture the alien to domesticate it, the alien hunts the humans, preying on them to reproduce itself and to feed. Two modes of colonization are in play here, depending on the mode of inhabiting the cosmos privileged by each species.

The second movie of the series, *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), brings colonization to the center of the narrative. Now the Weyland-Yutani mega-corporation is not only dealing with mining other worlds, but with “building better worlds,” as its slogan in the movie makes clear. The moon LV-426, only visited by the crew of *Nostromo* because of a distress signal, is now in the process of being occupied by the company. Around 60 families live in a colonial compound on the moon. After a couple of colonists find the derelict spaceship full of alien eggs, the creatures proliferate in the colony, killing or “cocooning” everyone but an 11-year-old girl, Newt. As the title of the movie already suggests, now we are dealing with many aliens, not only one, as in the first episode. The aliens make themselves a nest in the atmosphere processing station used to terraform the moon.

Ripley, recently found and awake after 57 years drifting in space, is sent to the colony as a consultant for a squad of heavily armed space marines. This time, Jones stays safe on a space station orbiting Earth. Instead of an android, the envoy of the company with the mission to capture the Alien is a human ambitious bureaucrat, Burke. The state-of-the-art weapons brought by the soldiers are no match for the aliens; all the soldiers die, but for Corporal Hicks, who pairs with Ripley and listens to her counsel. The fusion-powered atmosphere processing station malfunctions and blows up, killing the alien hive. Ripley, Newt, and Hicks escape with the help of an android, Bishop.

We find here a certain rearrangement of the elements present in the first film. If the cat is not there anymore, now the position of the domesticated non-human is occupied by the android Bishop, a member of a new generation of robots that was “fixed” to prevent the possibility of causing any damage to humans. Now the character that embodies the capitalist amorality of the company is a human man. In addition, a social differentiation appears in the alien hive: the reproductive queen is endowed with a certain intelligence or consciousness, being able to operate an elevator and command its caste of workers.

If the humans are colonizing LV-426, domesticating its environment by terraforming it, the aliens are colonizing the human colony in turn. As much as humans need to transform the ecology of the moon to make themselves *at home* (*domus*), the aliens need the humans to build their nest, a “home” for themselves. Nevertheless, the process of building these homely, domestic environments is different in each case. Humans need to create an ecology in which they can reproduce their domestic species to produce their needs, cultivating the land. But the aliens are not interested in making humans reproduce themselves. They are not domesticating humans. The dynamics of their inhabiting is one of contagion; once the resources of this colony are over, the alien eggs would have to wait, dormant, for new hosts to arrive.

## Something of a predator

Ripley's battle against the Weyland-Yutani corporation hits its apex in *Alien 3*. If the first chapter ends with a hint of multi-species tone, with the human-cat relation as the only one that survives the alien menace, *Aliens* tries to build a more conservative "happy ending," with the triangle Ripley-Hicks-Newt reinstating a traditional image of a family, in the company of a domesticated android. But then, to continue the series' exploration of a fully alien kind of interspecific (dis-)association, this traditional family will have to be broken apart.

The movie begins with the killing of all those characters but Ripley, as the spaceship that carries them crashes on Fiorina "Fury" 161. This is an all-male correctional facility of maximum security in which a foundry is run. On top of that, every inmate has a double-Y chromosome syndrome, which the movie arguably associates with a propensity to aggressiveness and to cognitive disabilities. Infiltrated in the ship was an alien "facehugger" that infects a dog of the facility, giving birth to an alien-dog creature. It is soon clear that Ripley also carries an alien in her womb, a queen. Managing to kill the alien-dog (not before it slaughters all but one of the prison inmates), Ripley is then presented with the possibility of giving herself up to the company, which would surgically extract her alien fetus. But she would rather die than hand the alien over to the corporation's scientists. Throwing herself into a furnace, she kills herself and the alien within her.

*Alien Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997) begins two hundred years after these events. The military state that now holds power over the occupation of space (bringing the previous era of the private corporation's dominance to a close) finally manages to capture the alien, and is able to clone the pregnant Ripley from genetic material gathered in the furnace. To reproduce the aliens, they need living human beings. Those are provided by a crew of smugglers. Among them is a female android, Call, who, after escaping the control of humans, infiltrates the spaceship to stop the experiments with the aliens. The experiment goes out of control when the captive alien creatures murder one of their own; its blood corrodes their cage, and they are set free. The military space station is evacuated, and the team of smugglers joins Ripley as they run for their ship. Programming the station filled with aliens to crash on Earth and kill them, Ripley, Call and two of the smugglers get to arrive safely on the planet. Ripley is finally back on Earth. But now she is not entirely at home: "I'm a stranger here myself," she says, right before the final credits.

The becoming-alien of Ripley is explicitly thematized here (Rizzo 2004, 342). Ripley's DNA is mixed with the creature in her womb during the cloning process that brings her back to life. Her blood becomes acid, like the alien's, and she is gifted with unusual strength. Her clothes resemble the alien's shapes, and her personality is filled with cynicism. "Something of a predator, isn't she?" comments a scientist after she humiliates and beats two men. In parallel, the alien that is born from Ripley has turned into something new: a queen with a womb that gives birth directly to a new creature without passing through the egg form and the inoculation process. Going through a becoming-human itself, this new alien kills the queen and recognizes Ripley as its mother; she destroys it but cries for its death.

The part played by Call, the female android, is worth a quick remark. In the first movie, the robot figure was deprived of empathy and morality; in the second, it becomes empathic, but domesticated. In the fourth film, Call goes rogue only to remain empathic towards humans, but now as a free being. No longer constrained by the ambivalent morality of her human creators, she may fight the military greed for power in order to protect the whole of humanity.

In this last chapter of the main series, the scientists are able to reproduce the aliens in captivity, but not to tame them. In a way, the only possible domestication of the alien is found in the accidental production of Ripley's new mutated body. She becomes something of a predator, but one that does not represent the same danger to humanity as the aliens. Still, in the end, she is liberated from her domesticators, like Call. Her own body is, on a biological level, a sign of relative success in the capturing and taming of the alien; but in a broader, sociopolitical instance, she escapes domestication by means of the predatory abilities that she genetically inherits from the alien.

### **Who is the predator?**

The predatory attribute of humans has also been extensively thematized in SF narratives about extraterrestrials. In the remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Scott Derrickson, 2008), aliens that care for the diversity of life in the cosmos invade Earth to save the native species of the planet and destroy the menace represented by humans.

In *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), set in a very similar universe as that of *Alien*, humans colonize the beautiful moon of Pandora aiming at the extraction of unobtainium, a superconducting mineral. The Na'vi, the moon's indigenous humanoids, are threatened by the expansion of the mining activity. Beings that have an emphasized connection to their environment (they can physically connect their bodies to that of other beings of the planet), they strongly evoke Donna Haraway's idea of *becoming-with* (2004; 2016b). In the cosmopolitical ecology of the movie, humans are collectively set in the predatory pole: even if some of them are sensitive to the mode of living of the Na'vi and the local ecology, their presence in Pandora is motivated by the predatory extractivism carried out by the company, whose greed sets the ground for a genocidal politics. After destroying Earth's environment, humans are about to do the same in Pandora, and they are willing to massacre the Na'vi if the indigenous stand in their way, in a blunt repetition of colonial history (see Rieder 2008 for an extensive exploration of the connection between the early history of English-language SF and the history and discourses of colonialism).

Here the humans are the alien invaders, in a perspectival inversion of the more usual narrative. They appear as domesticators of machines — there is no living creature, apart from humans themselves, on the human side of the narrative. The Na'vi, on the other hand, are in a relation of co-domestication with the several other native species shown on screen: for example, the flying creatures that the Na'vi ride have to choose their riders, as much as the Na'vi choose them. This co-domestication evokes an ethic of symbiosis. But other than domesticators, the Na'vi are mainly hunters. Still, a particular kind of predation is involved in their hunting activity. There should be no killing without a strong reason, and

every kill is a reason for mourning, for every living thing is part of Eiwa, the divine unity that connects Pandora's life as a huge biological network. This self-regulated cosmology of predation is, one can easily remark, loosely based on a myriad of extra-modern collectives that practice hunting as a central element of their cosmopolitics (Sztutman 2012), from Siberia (Willerslev 2004) to lowland South America (Lima 1999, Garcia 2018). The characterization of the Na'vi as indigenous in relation to the alien humans of Earth finds its form of expression in their reverberation of certain characteristics of indigenous peoples that differentiate them, in an anthropologically-informed modern imaginary, from the Moderns themselves.

On the other hand, SF has also explored interspecific relations that apparently escape both the idioms of predation and domestication. In a direct variation of the main theme of *Alien*, the short story *Bloodchild*, Octavia E. Butler presents an alien being whose mode of reproduction also depends on the impregnation of another species. But instead of preying on the humans that arrive on their planet escaping a destructed Earth, the Tlic arrange a political situation in which they let humans live on reservations, establishing a symbiotic relationship with them. These insectoid aliens insert their eggs into human bodies, and must surgically remove them before the hatching (or the larvae will eat the human host's flesh to death). The predatory potential of the relation is thus controlled by a diplomatic agreement that establishes a certain way of living together — a becoming-with not deprived of danger and suffering, but also filled with a strange sort of love.

But maybe we could identify two kinds of predations and of domestications in this group of narratives: [1] an uncontrolled, asymmetrical predation associated with looting, capturing, and indiscriminate killing; [2] a controlled, balanced predation associated with codified modes of hunting; [3] an asymmetrical, hierarchic domestication that coincides with the domination of Others in intra- and/or interspecific levels of relation to alterity; and [4] a co-domestication that evokes a symbiotic, symmetrical relationship in multispecies environments. In many of the narratives we are dealing with, Moderns are identified with relations [1] and [3]; extra-modern alterities, including the Tlic of Butler, or the Na'vi, and Ursula Le Guin's Athsheans (to whom we will come back below), can be associated with the other two modes of relation. This is usually the case if the non-humans are occupying the "indigenous" pole of the relation — the narrative, in those cases, is set in extraterrestrial environments. When aliens invade Earth, on the other side, they usually share the same modes of asymmetrical relation associated with the human colonization of other planets.

In a certain way, the creature of *Alien* embodies a predatory feature that is similar to the one associated, in the group of narratives we are dealing with, with modern humans in relation to their Others. The human inclination to environmental predation is especially highlighted in the series by the greed of the company and its individual workers (the first film underlines a discussion between them about their share in the profits of their travel), and by the mining activity of Nostromo. Again, it is significant that the role of antagonist in the first three episodes of the series is played by the powerful corporation that rules the occupation of space. To end the peril represented by the aliens, Ripley has to continually fight it, not for its predatory quality, but for its obsession with domesticating the alien. But

this domestication is also a step in the extraction of the predatory potential of the alien as military value.

It is compelling to note how an identification between the artificial android and the alien resonates with the contrast between machines and humans drawn by Philip K. Dick in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, a novel adapted to film by the same Ridley Scott only three years after directing *Alien* (resulting in another SF movie classic, *Blade Runner*). Dick creates a degraded world in which most animals are mechanical; “real” animals become incredibly expensive pets. And having pets is almost a moral obligation: it is a way to cultivate empathy, and empathy is what makes you human, according to religious beliefs widely spread in this society. But then, in parallel, synthetic humans are employed as slaves in the colonization of other planets, as most of what is left of humanity is leaving a decomposing Earth. Like the electric animals that humans create as pets, those androids are meant to be domesticated. But the humanoid robots are capable to think for themselves. And many of them do not want to be slaves.

As the robots often go rogue, fleeing from captivity, the State employs bounty hunters that search and “retire” the escaping androids, shooting them dead. To avoid retiring a non-synthetic human by mistake, the hunters must apply a test to detect the capacity of the subject to feel *empathy*. The androids are like humans in every way, but their empathic reaction to other beings — humans, animals, and other machines — is different, and this can be detected in the reaction of the subject to certain statements. Needless to say, at the core of all this is an intriguing paradox: if the hunters can kill androids — that is, if they lack empathy towards artificial humans — how do they differ from their prey? Adding to this paradox is the belief, included in the theological dogmas of the Mercerite religion, that the only exception to the prohibition of killing other beings is that one is allowed to kill “Killers.”

One of those professionals is the protagonist of the novel, Rick Deckard. In an interesting passage, Deckard justifies his actions by comparing androids to predators. “Empathy, he once had decided, must be limited to herbivores or anyhow omnivores who could depart from a meat diet. Because, ultimately, the empathic gift blurred the boundaries between hunter and victim, between the successful and the defeated”. According to his reasoning, if androids are not capable of feeling empathy, as humans do, they must be predators. Humans would be, by definition, *not predators*. Dick contrasts the auto-characterization of humans as domesticators (of mechanical animals and humans) with this predatory aspect of the androids. Since Deckard is himself a predator of androids, his humanity is constantly put at stake throughout the novel.

## **Taming worlds**

We can now recall how gender difference is explicitly put on stage by *Alien* and its sequels. Ripley inhabits a series of social environments unequivocally depicted as masculine: the mining crew, the marines, the male prison, the military vessel. In all those environments, her authority or leadership is constantly questioned by men. They either refuse to hear what she says or look down on her ideas. Still, she is always the one better suited to deal

with the alien, urging carefulness in the first movie, then being the only person that survived an encounter with the creature. She must always reconquer her leading role (Bundtzen 1987, 12). By challenging her own position as a domesticated being in a patriarchal space society (Zwinger 1992, 81), Ripley defies domestication itself. In relation to the creature she has to survive predation, in the domain of human relations her quest is above all against domestication — hers and the alien's.

However, in the group of interwoven narratives that we have mapped above, predation and domestication are not relations that distinguish aliens and humans in a simple opposition. As we have seen, humans are often pictured as predators: if not as individuals in relation to their prey, at least as collectives relating to their environment. In reversal, as we saw in *Avatar*, extraterrestrial beings can also be pictured as engaged in domesticating processes.

Moreover, predation and domestication are entangled in at least two ways. As Hage notes, asymmetrical domestication can be seen as having two important aspects, or being constituted essentially by two sub-processes: capturing and taming.

Any domesticated species has to be, historically speaking, captured and tamed before it can become domesticated. Nonetheless, the aim is to make it reproduce itself in captivity. That is, in general a domesticated species is one that no longer needs to be captured and tamed, though this capturing and taming have been the essential historical condition of possibility of its domestication. (Hage 2017, 89)

It is possible to associate *predation* with the first of those sub-processes (capturing), and *reproduction* with the second (taming). The act of capturing is part of the same semantic field of warfare, hunting, and therefore preying: it involves catching an enemy (in a war context), or seizing another living being from its original *milieu*. Taming, on the other hand, consists of modifying the affects of the being that was captured in order to adjust it to the purposes of the domesticator: in many cases, it relates to making them reproduce “in captivity,” or to control its mode of reproduction.

Second, and maybe more relevant, predation is presented as a “collateral effect” of domestication, something that escapes from it: focusing on “domesticating nature,” humans would end up more or less involuntarily preying on it. A key configurator of the hierarchical Chain of Being (Lovejoy 2001, 187) that lies at the core of how modern metaphysics organizes alterity, predation is to be avoided by all means when humans are in the position of *prey*. Nevertheless, it is as if modern humans, having domestication as their privileged domain of action, would counterinvent (Wagner 1981, 40) predation as the unavoidable flipside to this relation. This preying does not involve the common image of interspecies hunting, nor of intra-species war; it entails a sheer consumption of objectified elements, turned into “resources.” As such, the repetitive reproduction of a certain number of domesticated beings, and the production of a domestic environment out of the over-exploration of non-living entities, engender the figure of a “tamed world” which is, at the same time, a preyed one.

The *Alien* series stages this complex relation between relations by making them resonate together. As we noticed above, the alien creature mingles predation and reproduction in its central mode of interspecific relation, posing an inversion of the conventional, anthropocentric relationalities involved in this sphere. We could assume that from the point of view of modern humans, reproduction comprehends an encounter of sexual, intraspecies alterity in order to produce the continuity of the species, while predation presupposes the assimilation of an (interspecies) Other in order to produce the continuity of each individual predator. Instead of relying on sexual difference (as in human reproduction), the alien's reproductive mode is based on the difference between species. By conceiving creatures that prey on other species in order to reproduce themselves, the movies hold a diffracting artifact (Haraway 2004, 70) vis-à-vis the category of "humanity" that SF continually reinvents, inviting imagination to mythologize on the patterns of difference made apparent by the device. What emerges from this setting is a complex system of translations between the codes of nurturing, reproduction, sexuality, and gender.

One of its outcomes is the image of humans as predators of other humans and of whole environments: just as the aliens create domestic spheres when they focus on preying, humans are pictured as destroying their environs by domesticating them. Involved with mining, space colonization, and biological weapons, the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, in its pursuit of domesticating the predatory perfection of the alien, embodies predation itself.

I will end with another astonishing example of this short-circuit between predation and domestication, found in Ursula Le Guin's masterpiece on colonization, *The Word for World is Forest*. In the first chapter of the book, Le Guin employs free indirect speech in order to have us enter the mind of a colonizer proud of himself: the villain of the book, Captain Davidson. He is thinking about Athshe, the world he calls New Tahiti, and its native inhabitants, that he pejoratively calls "creechies":

The old creechie was moseying 'round, taking an hour to bring his breakfast from the cookhouse. "Hurry-up-quick!" Davidson yelled, and Ben pushed his boneless saunter into a walk. Ben was about a meter high and his back fur was more white than green; he was old, and dumb even for a creechie, but Davidson knew how to handle them. He could tame any of them, if it was worth the effort. It wasn't, though. Get enough humans here, build machines and robots, make farms and cities, and nobody would

need the creechies any more. And a good thing too. For this world, New Tahiti, was literally made for men. Cleaned up and cleaned out, the dark forests cut down for open fields of grain, the primeval murk and savagery and ignorance wiped out, it would be a paradise, a real Eden. A better world than worn-out Earth. And it would be his world. For that's what Don Davidson was, way down deep inside him: a world-tamer. He wasn't a boastful man, but he knew his own size. (1980, 12)

## Conclusion

In this article, I have investigated how the imagination of otherness in SF involves a complex game between terms (humans, aliens, animals, machines) and relations (predation, domestication, symbiosis) that cannot be reduced to simple oppositions. It is tempting to affirm a clear contrast between humans and aliens in science fiction narratives, as does Moisseff in her brilliant articles about the *Alien* series. Here, alien creatures are pictured as representing an Other to Western humanity that echoes features attached to non-Western peoples in the modern imaginary. Western humans would represent themselves as freed from “traditional” biological restraints in their reproductive function, while Aliens and non-Western peoples would be closely associated with animal society and with the image of insects, characterized by a proliferous mode of reproduction (Moisseff 2005, 81).

Although this is true for specific texts, the close attention to the composition of the different kinds of characters throughout SF and the relations they entail point to a fuzzier set of oppositions between them. Departing from the pair predation/domestication, which plays a clear role in characterizing aliens and humans, respectively, in the *Alien* series, I have shown how the contrast is relativized in different levels: if the alien creatures are domesticating their environment *through* predation, humans prey on their environments while focusing in processes of domestication. The entwining of these relations could be further manifolded by the addition of yet other modes of relating to the set, such as symbiosis or assimilation. And this is only possible if SF narratives are considered as variations of one another. Investigating how the texts connect by their differences allows us to bring forward insights on the big questions raised by the genre — in this case, what makes humans human in relation to other beings, real or imaginary, that populate the cosmos? The answer to such questions, one assumes, cannot be simple.



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