The Leviathan and The Cyborg:

The Influence of *Moby-Dick* in Sci-Fi Horror Films

By Jaquelin Elliott

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Professor Jamie L. Jones

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In his 1981 treatise on horror, *Danse Macabre,* Stephen King named three texts that he believed to be at “the foundation of a huge skyscraper of books and films- those twentieth century gothics which have become known as the modern horror story” (60-61): Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein.* “Like an almost perfect Tarot hand representing our lusher concepts of evil,” King writes, “they can be neatly laid out: The Vampire, The Werewolf, The Thing Without A Name” (61). The image of the tarot hand is intriguing as it begs the question “what other texts are in the deck?” Which texts, though they have not the primacy of the three King names, are the keystones of the modern horror genre? King would most likely include Henry James’ *Turn of the Screw,* which he claims nearly made it into the tarot hand as the progenitor of the modern ghost story, but which others? I strongly believe that, in fact, *Moby-Dick*, considered to be The Great American Canonical Novel, would be one of them. Asked to name the great monsters of American literature, it would be difficult not to mention Moby Dick, who Joseph Andriano, in his book *Immortal Monster: the Mythological Evolution of the Fantastic Beast In Modern Fiction And Film*, calls the “prototype for the modern Leviathan” (2). Moby Dick, both the novel and the White Whale himself, have undoubtedly entered the Western mythos, if the horror genre – that great, raw litmus test of a culture’s mythology— is any indication. The influence of *Moby-Dick* in horror, particularly the subgenre of sci-fi horror, can be keenly felt with references to *Moby-Dick* appearing in everything from *The X-Files* to *Jaws* to *Futurama.* The concept of whales and other cetaceans appearing in space has its own TV Tropes.com page[1]. *Wrath of Khan*, generally believed to be the best of the Star Trek

[1] TV Tropes is a wiki documenting instances of various plot conventions, archetypes, and other tropes found in creative media. Links to the site are often accompanied with a warning label as it is generally

films, is heavily based on *Moby Dick,* its monomaniacal villain spouting entire passages of Ahab's dialogue in his vengeance-fueled rants against Captain Kirk. The characters, settings, plot, and imagery of *Moby-Dick* are all over sci-fi horror, but to better understand *why* that might be, it may be best to first examine *how* it has left its mark.

Floating in the Black: The Heterotopias of the Sea, Space, and The Ship

> Col. Edward Carruthers: At least I enjoy the freedom of the ship.
> Col. Van Heusen: Why not? Can you think of a better prison?
> *It! The Terror from Beyond Space* (1958)

Long before John F. Kennedy referred to space as the new sea, people drew parallels between the ocean and outer space. The comparisons certainly make sense, as a spacecraft has more in common with a ship than an aircraft, as far as self-sufficiency and the need for long-term organization onboard go. A spacecraft can cut its engine and drift; a plane cannot. A spaceship can house a crew for months, even years, at a time; a plane can not. Why throw out thousands of years of maritime technique, organization, and jargon when it could simply be adopted, analogizing new concepts and places in terms and images that people are intimately familiar with? Especially when the sea and the heavens have so long been entwined? Not only did sailors use the stars for navigational purposes, but many physicists up until the early 20th century held the belief that celestial bodies actually floated in a fluid-like substance called luminiferous aether, believing that light waves had to have something to propagate through. This aether, "invented for the planets to swim in" according to the 1878 edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Maxwell), does not exist, of course, but, in the 19th century, was a concept well-entrenched in the

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agreed that "TV Tropes Will Ruin Your Life" and once on the site, a user will not be able to resist spending hours navigating it.

laws of physical science and, thus, may help explain why space has entered the popular imagination as a sort of second ocean.

Moby-Dick is full of celestial imagery, laced with references to constellations, including, of course, Cetus, “the whale”, who is sometimes referred to as “Leviathan”. In *Immortal Monster*, Joseph Andriano draws attention to this imagery as a deliberate attempt on Melville’s part to construct Moby Dick as a modern variation of the Biblical Leviathan myth. Andriano contends that Melville clearly understood that if his monster were to have true potency, it must be a creature of multiple realms; that a true Leviathan can not be forever bound to the sea, but must “subsume both land and sky, then indeed go beyond the sky” (1):

> Nor when expandingly lifted by your subject, can you fail to trace out great whales in the starry heavens, and boats in pursuit of them […] Thus at the North have I chased Leviathan round and round the Pole with the revolutions of the bright points that first defined him to me. […] With a frigate's anchors for my bridle-bitts and fasces of harpoons for spurs, would I could mount that whale and leap the topmost skies, to see whether the fabled heavens with all their countless tents really lie encamped beyond my mortal sight! (Melville 231)

Ishmael’s characterization of the whale as a space vehicle is surprisingly characteristic of the novel, which, on several occasions, makes reference to the concept of space travel. Ahab likens the Earth itself to a ship hurtling through space, noting that whales have penetrated the deepest depths of the sea "where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with the bones of millions of the drowned” (263).

This brings us now to what Foucault called “the heterotopia par excellence”: the ship. Indeed, the ship would appear to be the perfect heterotopia. Floating in the sea or in space, it functions in relation to the space that surrounds it. It is, as Foucault says, “a

place without a place, that exists by itself" (7). It sets out into the beyond and returns, its hold full of cargo, stories, and new knowledge, and so it is little wonder that science fiction has adopted many of the same tropes used in maritime fiction. Our own sea now mapped (for the most part, anyway) and space now truly the "final frontier", the heterotopia of the spacecraft has, in a large capacity, assumed the role of the "reserve of the imagination" (Foucault 7). Whether in space or on water, however, the space of the ship has a dark underbelly. For as much as it represents exploration, human ingenuity, and freedom, the space of the ship can also be tight and cramped. An engine part or just a breeze can mean the difference between life and death. Its asylum from the void outside also makes it a prison, trapping its crew with any hostile elements that may be aboard, and it is precisely this sense of claustrophobia that *Moby-Dick* and so many of the films that have spawned from it wish to emphasize. The opening shots of Ridley Scott's 1979 classic *Alien* draw the viewer through the winding, labyrinthine hallways of the commercial mining vessel *Nostromo.* The ship is gritty, clearly lived-in, with disorienting round rooms and narrow, uniform hallways, full of sharp turns and so very many places for a thing to hide. *Alien* is frequently lauded for uniting traditionally Gothic imagery with existential minimalism and it has become a joke in horror circles that the film solves the problem of so many haunted house stories without needing to resort to a convoluted solution: 'if the house is haunted, why not leave?' 'You can't. There's nowhere to go."

A horror story set aboard a ship is a haunted house story with one key difference: there is also an external threat. Where can Dr. David Bowman go in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) when his ship's computer begins murdering the crew? Where can the crew of the Nostromo or the Pequod go when the authority aboard the ship turns against

them? Outside is nothing but placelessness and the creatures swimming through it.

"I Admire Its Purity": The Animal Nemesis

Moby Dick personifies a monster different from the three in King's tarot hand: the animal nemesis. The animal nemesis is precisely what it sounds like – an animal antagonist, driven by instinct and without discernible conscience. Perhaps it has encroached on humankind's environment, perhaps it has been encroached upon, perhaps it has even been restlessly pursued… regardless of the circumstance, it will defend itself and violently, if need be. Of the three in King's tarot hand, it most closely resembles The Thing Without a Name, but if we are to understand Mary Shelley's intelligent and erudite monster to be the progenitor of that category, then creatures like Moby Dick do not fit. Moby Dick does not attempt to fit in with or understand human beings. He and other monsters in his category are animals, making attempted vengeance against them seem all the more psychotic, but, conversely, making them all the more potent a threat. A thing without conscience –that kills from instinct – is a thing without mercy. It is precisely this fact marine biologist Matt Hooper uses to try to spur the mayor of Amity into action in *Jaws*:

> Hooper: Mr. Vaughn, what we are dealing with here is a perfect engine, an eating machine. It's really a miracle of evolution. All this machine does is swim and eat and make little sharks, and that's all (Benchley).

The whale is equally lauded as a marvel of natural engineering in Moby Dick, measured and documented in its cetology chapters with detail bordering on obsession. It is this element of the architectural/biomechanical that is so well-reflected in the illustrations of Matt Kish and which makes Moby Dick's status as a potential antagonist so complex. The animal nemesis is a villain that is not a villain. At least, not if one factors conscience

and accountability into villainy… not that makes such a flawlessly engineered creature any less frightening.

Such a creature makes a memorable appearance in Ridley Scott's 1979 classic *Alien*, which was based, in part, on *IT! The Terror from Beyond Space* (1958). The crew of a commercial mining/towing vessel, the Nostromo, awakens from hyper-sleep to find that they have been knocked off course by the ship's central computer M.U.T.H.U.R/"Mother". The ship has received a suspicious distress signal which the crew have been enlisted by their corporation to answer. They investigate the derelict planet from which the signal is originating and soon find themselves entangled in a terrifying game of cat and mouse with a brutally violent beast that has invaded their ship. The ship's insidious medical officer, Ash (who we shall return to in time), startles the crew by stating that there is no way to kill the creature that has been picking them off one by one. "You still don't understand what you're dealing with, do you?" He smirks. "The perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility." "You admire it," a member of the crew states with terrible, quiet certainty. Ash regards her with a look of disgust and corrects her: "I admire its *purity*. A survivor … unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality." (O'Bannon). That is the animal nemesis precisely— a thing that embodies the primal desires to survive, to feed, and to procreate.

The creature that Ash describes in *Alien* embodies these desires very well, starting with how it manages to get aboard the Nostromo. Responding to the distress signal, the crew finds themselves in a derelict spacecraft. As they wander further into this labyrinth, a member of the crew, Kane, finds a nest of dozens of strange, fleshy eggs. Looking closer, he sees something squirming inside one of them. The top of the egg splits open

and, as he leans in for a better look, the thing inside lashes out, smashing through the glass plate of Kane's helmet. In the medical bay, the crew is forced to saw his helmet off, removing it to reveal a strange, crablike creature that has affixed itself to Kane's face. Any attempt to remove proves too dangerous, as not only does the thing have its tail wrapped tightly around Kane's throat, it has acidic blood with the potential to eat its way through the hull. After a few hours, the thing falls off and Kane awakens, clearly disoriented. At dinner, the crew talk and joke, glad that all has returned to normal. Suddenly, Kane begins coughing and retching. The crew eases him onto the table, where he violently spasms in agony while they look on in horrified confusion. They scream as something in his chest appears to burst, spattering their faces with blood. Suddenly, a thing – long, pale, eyeless— rises from his ruined body and it becomes terribly clear what has been done to Kane. The thing has impregnated him in an act of oral rape, using his body as a makeshift womb and thereby exploding, forgive the pun, gender boundaries as they are biologically understood. As Gallardo and Smith put it: "when Kane's chest exploded and that phallic little beastie escaped from the depth of our unconscious and onto the screen, with it went the primacy of the sexed body in science-fiction films" (14)[2].

The description of the Chestburster as phallic is, of course, entirely apt. Screenwriters Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett wanted emphasis placed on the alien's potential as a sexual threat, something they believed had never been done in science fiction before, and so enlisted Surrealist artist H.R. Giger to design a beast that oozed sexual menace in each of its life stages: the fleshy egg with a labial opening; the

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[2] Other films, such as *Creature of the Black Lagoon* (1954), explored the potential sexual threat of the animal nemesis, but never had both female and male characters been at risk.

Facehugger, vaginal in appearance, but with crablike fingers that holds its victim's face immobile as it inserts a member down the victim's throat; the phallic Chestburster; and, finally, the adult Xenomorph, a biomechanical nightmare with no discernible eyes, a phallic skull, and a prehensile tail that creeps between its victim's legs. At the moment of attack, the Xenomorph's lips (dripping with KY Jelly thanks to the truly inspired design team) pull back to reveal pharyngeal jaws on the end of a rigid proboscis that darts out, tearing through flesh and bone, and it is this juxtaposition of male and female genital imagery – the phallus and castrating vagina dentata—that is key. The gender of the alien's victim is irrelevant; to it, both women and men are nothing but potential wombs. That the womb this time was a *male* crewmember was meant to disturb the audience. O'Bannon has stated that Kane's impregnation via interspecies, "homosexual oral rape" was meant to "make the men in the audience cross their legs" (*Alien Evolution*). To its creators, the alien finds its real power to disturb in the terror of emasculation.

Any reader of *Moby-Dick* can attest to its status as a symbolist tome of penis jokes. The novel is rife with male sexuality, bawdy jokes (The Virgin has no sperm oil inside her, har har), and overtly phallic imagery. From the ritualized use of the whale's penis and foreskin in Chapter 95: The Cassock to the imagery produced by penetrative harpoons, much of *Moby-Dick* is a psychoanalyst's field day. The novel's preoccupation with the phallus finds no better embodiment than in Moby Dick himself and the loss of Ahab's leg – an image alluded to at the end of *Jaws* when the shark manages to get Quint waist-deep in its mouth and bites down— has become the Great American Castration Metaphor. Over-determinative psychoanalysis aside, Melville makes a point to make this castration metaphor explicit in Chapter 106: Ahab's Leg in which it is revealed that Ahab

had an incident prior to sailing aboard the Pequod when his ivory leg detached and "all but pierced his groin" (389). Melville's conception of the whale as a castrating force is fascinating, because whales, like the beast in *Alien*, present a visual dichotomy of male and female genitalia throughout the novel. Whales act as powerful battering rams in the novel, but also as wombs, as when Queequeg pulled Tashtego from the head of the whale "and thus, through the courage and great skill in obstetrics of Queequeg, the deliverance, or rather, delivery of Tashtego, was successfully accomplished" (290).

Before we continue on in this vein, it perhaps may be best to disambiguate the two kinds (if we can narrow it down to only two) of sexual terror present in horror media. First, there is sexual disturbance that arises from within. This is the realm of Mr. Hyde or, more pertinently, his metaphorical cousin the werewolf. The sexual terror associated with the Hyde figure/werewolf is not only the fear of a volatile sexual awakening, but fear of discovery – of being branded abnormal and being persecuted, perhaps even lynched, because of it. It is this fear that helps account for why the werewolf has been appropriated as a metaphor for both male and female puberty in films such as *Ginger Snaps* (2000) and many LGBT horror films and stories. The second kind of sexual horror comes from an external source: sexual terror of the Other. This is the terror embodied by the vampire and, in a different capacity, the animal nemesis. What differentiates the sexual threat of the vampire from that of the animal nemesis is the element of seduction, which has been present in our modern understanding of the vampire since Stoker's *Dracula.* The vampire is disturbing because it seduces, because everything about it says, as Stephen King puts it, "'I will rape you with my mouth and you will love it'" (75). A vampire is not only a sexual threat, but a moral one. It threatens not only to "rape" its victim, but to rupture the

victim's morality and turn her or him into something just like it. A vampire is conscious of the fact it is committing evil; the animal nemesis is not. Again, it has no conception of evil. Moby Dick and the beasties I believe to have generated from him present something different, something partly embodied in Ishmael's musing on why Moby Dick's color might be so appalling to the human mind:

> […] is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? (Melville 164)

The sexuality presented by Moby Dick is equally absent: absent of morality and any distinctive gender boundaries. The true sexual threat of the animal nemesis is that its existence implies that everything we think we understand about sexuality, both morally and biologically, can be subverted. While such an understanding of sexuality might prove exciting or freeing for some, it has undoubtedly unsettled others and will most likely continue to be a fear exploited by filmmakers desiring to make the audience uncomfortably cross their legs.

Ahab and Cybernetic Eye

> Dr. David Bowman: Open the pod bay doors, HAL.
> HAL: I'm sorry, Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that.
> Dr. David Bowman: What's the problem?
> HAL: I think you know what the problem is just as well as I do.
> Dave: What are you talking about, HAL?
> HAL: This mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardize it.
>
> -- *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)

In *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King makes a distinction of the kinds of responses a reader can (or should) experience reading horror. There is terror, the "finest" of these; horror, which induces more of a physical response; and, at the bottom, "gag-reflex revulsion" or

“the gross-out” (37). Terror is placed at the top of this hierarchy, because it is “of the mind” (37); it is the kind of disturbance that gnaws, that becomes more upsetting the longer one thinks on it. It is the emotion inspired by betrayal, helplessness, and the uncanny experience of coming in contact with a person who does not *behave* like a person. Someone, in other words, like Ahab, who disregards his crew’s safety in pursuit of a personal agenda. Such a situation is frightening because it is an aberration. Fealty is owed to a captain and, in exchange, a captain should never betray his or her crew’s trust, but this is precisely what Ahab does – abuse his authority. The thought of someone who has so clearly come unhinged wielding absolute authority is, of course, completely terrifying and it is this aspect that Ahab-like figures in horror often tap into. Any sign of disagreement or autonomy on the part of the crew is met with either a violent lashing out, such as Captain Quint in *Jaws* brutally smashing the *Orca*’s CB radio as Martin Brody attempts to call the Coast Guard for help, or with an eerie, implacable mission statement, such as Khan delivers in *Wrath of Khan* when his crew expresses concern with his obsession with destroying Captain Kirk: “He tasks me. He tasks me, and I shall have him! I'll chase him round the Moons of Nibia, and round the Antares Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up!” (Sowards). This speech is, of course, directly based on one of Ahab’s many rants in *Moby-Dick*, a copy of which can be seen in a shot of Khan’s book shelf: "He tasks me; he heaps me [...] Aye, aye! and I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up" (Melville 136). Khan references *Moby-Dick* again and again throughout his pursuit of Captain Kirk, whom he holds responsible for the death of his wife, right up to his last words. “No”, he hisses as the USS Enterprise

recedes into the distance, “No, you can't get away. From hell's heart, I stab at thee. For hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee” (Soward). Again, a direct quote from Ahab: “Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee.” (Melville 470). *Wrath of Khan* is perhaps the most self-conscious example of Ahab’s presence in sci-fi-horror, but it is intriguing to note that he has left his mark on the genre in stranger, subtler ways.

Part of the terror of Ahab is not just his authority, but his omnipresence aboard the Pequod. In the tight confines of the ship, there seems to be no place to escape him to the point that it feels as though Ahab and the Pequod has become a single entity: “From even the barely hinted imputation of usurpation, and the possible consequences of such a suppressed impression gaining ground, Ahab must of course have been most anxious to protect himself. That protection could only consist in his own predominating brain and heart and hand, backed by a heedful, closely calculating attention **to every minute atmospheric influence which it was possible for his crew to be subjected to**” (Melville 180). It is suggested that Ahab, like the motherboard of a spacecraft, has absolute control of his vessel, right down to the atmosphere. He is hyper-aware of everything that goes on aboard his ship, his incentive gold coin staring out from the mast like a terrible, inhuman eye. An echo of Ahab can be found in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in the form of the ship’s computer HAL 9000, who stares out from the control panel with a monstrous, unblinking eye of his own. Self-assured that he is “foolproof and incapable of error” (Kubrick), HAL nonetheless begins to malfunction. Worried, the ship’s mission pilots Dr. David Bowman and Dr. Frank Poole retreat to a

private pod where they can speak without having HAL overhear. They agree to deactivate the computer if the malfunctions continue, unaware that HAL is reading their lips through the pod bay window. At this "imputation of usurpation", HAL decides to protect himself, determined that nothing jeopardize the ship's mission. His response is to sever one of the crewmembers' oxygen hose and to cut all life support functions to the three crewmembers resting in cryogenic animation, murdering all but one member of the crew.

The concept of Ahab as a kind of cyborg is not actually so far-fetched, considering how heavily Melville's novel utilizes biomechanical imagery. Ahab, in particular, often seems more machine than man, fired in a foundry and "cast in bronze" (intro). He understands his relationship to the crew in highly mechanical terms: "My one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve" (I47). He is not the only character figured this way in novel (the crew is like-wise described – they are the "wheels", after all), but what makes Ahab's case so disturbing is just how thoroughly his humanity has been stripped away. Not only is Ahab likened to a gear in his function aboard the ship, his insides have been figuratively replaced with them: "Ahab, without speaking, was slowly rubbing the gold piece against the skirts of his jacket, as if to heighten its luster, and, without using any words, was meanwhile lowly humming to himself, producing a sound so strangely muffled and inarticulate that it seemed the mechanical humming of the wheels of his vitality in him" (142). Unlike his crew, Ahab is restless in his purpose. His thirst for revenge propels him forward like a locomotive engine. He is that impossible perpetual motion machine, never tiring, never giving up, even if it means risking the lives of his crew.

This fear of human life being rendered secondary to a mission also appears in

Alien. Determined to find a way to kill the Xenomorph, First Lieutenant Ellen Ripley logs into the ship's computer, MUTHUR, and discovers that the ship has been given "Special Order 937 - Science Officer Eyes Only". With an emergency command override, she is able to access the details of this order:

> "*Nostromo* rerouted to new co-ordinates. Investigate life form. Gather specimen. Priority one: ensure return of organism for analysis. All other considerations secondary. Crew expendable." (O'Bannon)

Ripley is then attacked by Ash the science officer, who is quickly revealed to be a robot installed by the corporation controlling the *Nostromo.* The Company's desire to obtain the Xenomorph in hopes of utilizing it as a biological weapon will continue throughout the *Alien* franchise, at the expense of many of the characters' lives. Indeed, by the end of *Alien*, nearly the entire crew is dead. Only Ripley escapes by setting up the *Nostromo* to self-destruct in an attempt to kill the alien and bailing out in one of the ship's "life boats". Hoping to eventually be picked up, she enters cryogenic animation aboard the lifeboat and drifts through the abyss in a death-like sleep, like Ishmael atop Queeqeug's coffin.

Reshuffling The Tarot

Joseph Andriano says he chose *Moby-Dick* for his case study on the Immortal Monster not only because it provided a prototype for the modern Leviathan, but also because the novel problematizes the dichotomy of "high art and pop culture" (2), having indelibly left its mark on both. Andriano later adds that "distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow culture are irrelevant in the realm of myth" (122). Myth is precisely what the horror genre trades in. Its pool of influences is filled to the brim with fairytales, folklore, urban legends, and Ovidian renderings of myths, and urban legends. And yet few would call

Ovid a horror writer. Or George Orwell, or Dante, or the Grimms, or Hawthorne, or Melville. It is a tag each of them earned, but one rarely applied to any of them. The bulk of academia would deem it a tag not worthy of them, a criticism brought on by the pretense that all genres of fiction do not wade in that same pool. All Western fiction is operating within the same literary traditions – the same pool of past literature, mythology, philosophy, history, and science. In entering that pool, *Moby-Dick* became fair game and its influence on science fiction and horror films is strong evidence of its staying power; of its place in Western mythology. Spread out the horror tarot deck before you on a table and beside the ghost, the vampire, the werewolf, you will find a card emblazoned with a whale.

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