

ILLUSIONARY STRENGTH; AN ANALYSIS OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN  
SCIENCE FICTION AND HORROR FILMS IN *FATAL ATTRACTION*, *ALIENS*, AND  
*THE STEPFOORD WIVES*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Humanities

By

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B.A., Michigan State University, 2008

2012  
Wright State University

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

December 4, 2012

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Jennifer Ruben ENTITLED Illusionary Strength: An Analysis of Female Empowerment in Science Fiction and Horror Films in Fatal Attraction, Aliens, and The Stepford Wives BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Humanities.

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## ABSTRACT

Ruben, Jennifer Lynn. M.H. Master of Humanities Program, Wright State University, 2012. Illusionary Strength; An Analysis of Female Empowerment in Science Fiction and Horror films in *Fatal Attraction*, *Aliens*, and *The Stepford Wives*.

An expanded notion of empowerment along with three specific theories – Beauvoir’s concept of the Other, Speciesism, Cyborg Feminism – is used to analyze the female protagonists and antagonists in the following 1970’s and 1980’s science fiction and horror films: *Fatal Attraction*, *Aliens*, and *The Stepford Wives*. The female protagonists are allowed more access to power as human beings pitted against nonhuman antagonists, but these characters are ultimately not empowering for women because they reinforce rather than undermine the patriarchal structure. Implications for further research encourage a critique of female empowerment based on both gender *and* species.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, feminist scholars have begun to research and analyze the roles of women in Hollywood film (Tasker, Schubart, Faludi, Helford). The ongoing debate is whether women's roles in American cinema represent empowering female characters. Current research focuses on the roles of white female protagonists in Hollywood film during the 1970s and the 1980s. Films of this era raise the following question: how are female protagonists perceived as empowering characters? The question takes into consideration the meaning of empowerment by analyzing three important concepts: the influence of second wave feminism, the patriarchal family and western patriarchal culture. The female protagonists are perceived as empowering individuals through their actions within patriarchal society. This paper explores controversial female protagonists and what it means to be empowering for women.

The need to address female empowerment is rooted in oppression. Reeves and Baden suggest that American men hold more political, economic, and social power than women (4). Society grants men a greater number of opportunities. For example, men typically earn higher wages than women. The wage gap creates an unequal distribution of economic power that allows a man to act as head of the household. Further, men hold power within institutions such as church and government. Sally Scholz provides a working definition of empowerment. She states, "Often when people are victimized by oppression, they fail to see their own power. The process of liberation then is also a process of empowerment – a freeing from the bonds that keep one from seeing and acting

on or with one's own power" (135). Empowerment is the recognition of one's own position as an oppressed individual in society, and liberating oneself to break free from the oppressor. The very notion of women's empowerment presupposes patriarchal power. For example, an oppressed woman may attempt to break free from the domineering powers of patriarchal bondage. Historical representations of women in Hollywood film reinforce the traditional roles of women as oppressed and men as oppressor.

Only recently has Hollywood cast women as lead characters who defy the stereotypical feminine role in society. Hollywood cinema often depicts stereotypical notions of women and how they should behave. These conventional character roles reflect a specific time period within society. Classic Hollywood films from the 1920s portrayed women as passive. Often women played the part of mother, wife, or love interest. According to Schubart, "The good mother is nurturing and reproductive, and constitutes the mental space of the family. She is the family. She is the womb where the family grows" (30). Women worked to support and uphold patriarchy as reproducers and nurturers of the family. Unlike women, men had access to pursue a broader range of character roles that were not confined to the role of father, husband, or lover. Men dominated the majority of character roles in Hollywood cinema. They dominated entire genres such as action, science fiction and horror (Schubart 5). Gender roles in film reinforce patriarchal norms and values.

In the 1960s, conventional gender roles for men and women began to change. Women's character roles transformed dramatically at this time. Female characters started to emerge in greater numbers (Schelde 76), appearing in larger selections of roles. They took on leadership roles instead of relying on man. The 1970s marked yet more changes

to classic Hollywood female roles due to the societal influence of the Women's Liberation Movement. Two significant pieces of literature influenced the emergence of the Second Wave Movement. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* addressed the oppression of women in western culture and influenced women's views on the patriarchal family. The Second Wave Movement urged women to take a stand on women's issues, and sought the liberation of women in all aspects of their lives. Dow states that second wave feminism challenged women "to take the political and make it personal" (127), so the privacy of one's home became a political concern for women. Women recognized their own power as an oppressed gendered group and used that power to liberate themselves from their traditional societal roles. This quest for liberation influenced Hollywood cinema to change its representations of women. Since Hollywood films reflect the time period in which they are made, film creates new meanings of the feminine.

Second wave feminism in the 1970s marked the emergence of female lead characters in predominantly male genres. Schubart argues, "In the seventies, women entered film genres that until then had been thought of as 'male': action films, science fiction films, westerns, war movies, martial arts films, revenge films" (5). Female characters gradually emerged in greater numbers because these genres were no longer solely dominated by men. Therefore, women were able to re-construct gender roles. For instance, actresses portrayed characters with qualities of independence, confidence, and determination while simultaneously rejecting their traditionally passive roles (Tasker 121). Instead of playing the role of housewife, these new female lead characters portrayed working-women outside the home.



This trend continued during the 1980s, as women attained higher education, sought professional jobs and obtained middle class status (Valdiva and Projansky 284). Women sought power through confidence and independence while fighting patriarchal traditional family values. This enabled women to challenge patriarchy. Ideally, the oppressed woman acknowledged her own power, and attempted to liberate herself from patriarchal bonds. According to Schubart, she represented “a figure of oppression as well as liberation” through her confident demeanor (7). In film, the female protagonist projected anger onto patriarchy and challenged male authority. Brown observes, “The growth of cinematic images of women kicking ass helps push the envelope of culturally appropriate gender traits” (69). The lead female’s aggression toward patriarchal power creates an empowering image for women in society that thrusts aside clichéd notions of women.

Scholars such as Yvonne Tasker, Rikke Schubart, Sherrie Inness, Jeffrey Brown, Susan Faludi, Elyce Helford, and Susan George analyze female protagonists in film. Specifically, they evaluate female empowerment based on physical strength, their ability to acquire power, and non-feminine characteristics. Scholars also examine the characters through the perspective of the Other. Edward Said used the concept of the Other to describe how western culture marginalizes non-western culture in his argument on Orientalism. The concept of the Other is used to exclude a marginalized group while keeping a dominant group in a position of power. Beauvoir applies the concept of the Other to explain gender roles in patriarchal society. She explains, “[Woman] is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the subject; he is the Absolute. She is the

Other” (6) while further suggesting that women remain in a “state of dependence” (159). Based on the criteria of the Other, Tasker evaluates the typical female character in action cinema, “female Action heroes are constructed in narrative terms as macho/masculine, as mothers or as Others: sometimes even as all three at different points within the narrative” (69). Sometimes female protagonists display traditional and non-traditional roles (displaying feminine and non-feminine traits) within the same film.

Not all scholars agree on a female character’s empowering qualities. Sometimes the female protagonist is labeled ‘empowering’ simply because she demonstrates unfeminine characteristics. Thus, female lead characters often emphasize their masculine rather than their feminine qualities. This phenomena is illustrated by the descriptive words often paired with female protagonists, “the repetitive use of ‘hard’ as descriptive of the heroines emphasizes the removal of the ‘soft’ (read: feminine) qualities” (Brown 60). Masculine or hard qualities repeatedly occur throughout many films and overpower the softer “feminine” qualities.

Helford provides an example of two well-known female protagonists who demonstrate strong masculine qualities, Ellen Ripley of the *Alien* series and Sarah Conner of the *Terminator* series. Both demonstrate a sense of determination, strength, and “shed traditional feminine traits, such as passivity, gentleness and emotionality” (“Tank Girl” 3). Ripley and Conner depict masculine qualities and sublimate feminine traits; these characters use guns and strength to represent an empowering image of women.

Traditionally, guns symbolized masculinity and forcefulness. According to Brown, “Both guns and muscles can be seen to empower women in ways that have, until recently, been solely masculine” (60). Some scholars (Graham, Knight, Brown) argue that Ripley is

empowering for women in Hollywood cinema because of her ability to use guns and weapons symbolized as masculine.

During the 1980s, Ripley and Conner emerged as central icons in popular culture while acting as role models for women in western society. Oftentimes when women watched Hollywood films, they identified with the female lead characters (Berenstein 59). These fictional women can thus influence real women in society acting as catalysts for empowerment. According to Reeves and Baden, women's empowerment "does not imply women taking over control previously held by men, but rather the need to transform the nature of power relations" (35). Utilizing this definition, empowerment for women focuses on changing the power dynamics of a patriarchal hierarchy rather than claiming that women should have more power than men. The female protagonists challenge the power dynamics of a patriarchal hierarchy by posing a threat to male authority. Some scholars question whether Ripley and Conner actually challenge patriarchal society. The debate is still ongoing.

As exemplified by the Ripley and Conner characters in *Aliens* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, science fiction and horror films were the first genres to cast women in empowering roles that defied male power in the 1970's and 1980's. More specifically these genres incorporated a greater number of female leads. Science fiction and horror films provided women opportunities to star as empowering lead characters. Women were cast in roles that provided opportunities for work such as scientists, researchers, investigators, and supervisors. For example, the science fiction film *The Andromeda Strain* (1971) incorporates a female lead character named Dr. Ruth Leavitt who is the only female scientist among her colleagues researching and observing the alien specimen

from outer space. Characters such as Dr. Ruth Leavitt exemplify the shift within science fiction and horror during the 1970s. The themes of female empowerment continued into the 1980s, a result of the Second Wave Movement. In order to understand the themes of female empowerment in these genres, one must examine the following question: how are female protagonists perceived as empowering characters in science fiction and horror films during these decades? The answer to this question lies in an analysis of three significant films from this era.

*Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Aliens* (1986), and *The Stepford Wives* (1975) remain three of the most well known films in science fiction and horror cinema. The films are significant in that they fit the following three criteria for analysis: the presence of a female protagonist and an antagonist, a physical interaction between both female characters, and scholarly controversy surrounding the plot's emphasis on women's empowerment. All three films received attention and created controversy surrounding both the female protagonist and antagonist. In each film these characters illustrate women's empowerment. Unlike *Fatal Attraction*, *Aliens*, and *The Stepford Wives*, many of the 1970's and 1980's science fiction and horror films rarely included both a female protagonist and a female antagonist. When both a female protagonist and antagonist appear in the films, they did not engage in any direct confrontation. It is important to understand women's empowerment through the perspectives of both female characters because the protagonist represents a traditional role and the antagonist represents a non-traditional gender role in society. Thus, each film provides space for ongoing debate by film critics. The film provides space for the debate by presenting characters that have two

distinct roles in society and discussing whether these roles represent women's empowerment.

The horror film *Fatal Attraction* (1987) explores the intersection of second wave feminism with male-female relationships and ideas of family. The film won several academy awards and earned considerable revenue in the box office.<sup>1</sup> The female protagonist Beth Gallagher is a stay-at-home mom. Her husband Dan Gallagher is a lawyer who engages in a one-night stand with the psychopathic female antagonist, and book editor, Alex Forrest. *Fatal Attraction* raised many social concerns for feminists with the portrayal of the single career woman as a murderous monster, in contrast to the portrayal of the stay-at-home wife and mom as a hero. The film illustrates the adulterous relationship between Alex and Dan and the impact on Beth's relationship to Dan when she finds out about the affair. As the husband, Dan represents patriarchal power. The film also portrayed mixed messages regarding gender relations between men and women, as well as the roles of women in the postfeminist 1980s (Dow, Davis, Sherwin, Joshel, Berland and Wechter). In the backlash against feminism, the Second Wave Movement was blamed for women's unhappiness. Some scholars believe Beth portrays an empowering woman through her traditional role as mother and wife [homemaker] (Babener, Joshel, Bromley and Hewitt). In contrast, other scholars argue that she is not empowering for the very same reasons.

*Aliens* (1986), the second film in the *Alien* series underlines social issues including racism, speciesism, colonialization, feminism, and ethnocentrism. The film was nominated for multiple awards and grossed millions of dollars.<sup>2</sup> The film features Ellen Ripley as a civilian advisor for a military crew heading to a foreign planet known as

Planet LV-426. The male protagonist, Corporal Hicks, works alongside Ripley. The female antagonist is an alien queen on Planet LV-426. The movie depicts Ripley's conflict with an alien queen. The other male characters, the alien offspring, and the Weyland-Yutani Company, that employs Ripley, represent different forms of patriarchy. Ripley shows strength, determination, the ability to make decisions, and independence without conforming to traditional gender roles (Wood, Graham, Moore, Dadlez, Bach and Langer, Jeffords, Helford, Melzer).

*The Stepford Wives* (1975) is an adopted screenplay based on the novel *The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin. The film addresses colonization, racism, feminism, and cyborg feminism. *The Stepford Wives* was nominated for and earned several nominations while grossing several million dollars.<sup>3</sup> The film features a female protagonist named Joanna Eberhart, a homemaker struggling to solve the mystery of the town of Stepford, Connecticut. Her husband Walter is a member of the men's association in town. The female antagonist, Joanna's clone, is a female cyborg. The film illustrates Joanna's relationship to her clone and the Stepford housewives. The Men's Association of Stepford symbolizes patriarchal power. *The Stepford Wives* addressed social and political issues including women's liberation and second wave feminism (Boruzkowski, Silver, Elliott, Helford, Dow, Gremler, Johnston and Sears). The film presents the female protagonist as an empowering woman who maintains control over her body (Silver, Boruzkowski, Gremler).

Based upon my analysis of women in the science fiction and horror genre, I argue the female protagonists in *Fatal Attraction*, *Aliens*, and *The Stepford Wives* are not empowering for women because they do not directly challenge patriarchy. Although the

female protagonists in these films are allowed more access to power, as human beings pitted against non-human antagonists, these characters are ultimately not empowering for women because they reinforce, rather than undermine the patriarchal structure. Therefore, their resistance to gender norms fails to threaten patriarchy. Instead, the female characters act in the interests of a patriarchal hierarchy, where men dominate and women symbolize the status of the 'Other.' The three female protagonists fail to represent empowering models for *womankind*. Instead, they are granted access to power for *humankind*. They identify as *human* more than as *women*.

I argue that the female protagonists from these three films acquire more access to *individual* power than *societal* power. The female protagonist achieves greater access to individual power as a human through her conflict with the female antagonist. The female protagonist (human) challenges the female antagonist (nonhuman) and patriarchal control through depictions of reproduction, and the struggle for species survival. Patriarchal society grants the female protagonist access to some power in the hierarchy, since she is 'less of an Other' than the nonhuman female antagonist. The female protagonist embodies 'less of an Other' because she values human life whereas the female antagonist harms human life.

Film scene analysis and theory applications are utilized throughout the argument. Key theories for my work include Beauvoir's application to the concept of the Other, Critical Race Theory, Speciesism, and Cyborg Feminism. This paper is divided into five chapters. Chapters two through four explore each of these three films and include a film synopsis, a discussion of the debate surrounding the empowerment of the female protagonist and an analysis of the film. My argument discusses the characters' lack of

empowerment for women and their access to power as human beings. The nonhuman violently disrupts human relationships by imposing her presence onto society. Finally, chapter five brings the analysis and theories together to form a conclusion. Together, each chapter provides a deeper understanding of women in the science fiction and horror genre, while at the same time evaluating the women based on whether they represent female empowerment and support humanity.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Fatal Attraction (1987)*. *Internet Movie Database*. Internet Movie Database, 2011. Web. 5 Jan. 2011.

“Fatal Attraction.” *The-Numbers.com*. Nash Information Services, LLC., 2011. Web. 5 Jan. 2011.

James Dearden wrote the film and Adrian Lyne directed the film. He also directed *Flashdance*, *Jacobs Ladder*, and *9 ½ weeks*. The film runs for 119 minutes and earned over \$100 million dollars domestically as well as 320 million dollars worldwide. The film received six academy awards: Best Picture, Best Actress in a Leading Role, Best Actress in a Supporting Role, Best Director, Best Film Editing, and Best Adapted Screenplay.

<sup>2</sup> *Aliens (1986)*. *Internet Movie Database*. Internet Movie Database, 2011. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.

James Cameron wrote and directed the film. He also directed *Titanic*, *Avatar*, and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. The film totals 137 minutes and earned over 85 million dollars domestically as well as \$131 million dollars worldwide. The film was nominated for seven academy awards. The movie won a Saturn Award as Best Science Fiction film from the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror films in 1986.

<sup>3</sup> *The Stepford Wives (1975)*. *Internet Movie Database*. Internet Movie Database, 2011. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.

“The Stepford Wives.” *The-Numbers.com*. Nash Information Services, LLC., 2011. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.

Bryan Forbes wrote and directed the film as well as *The Rose*, *Chaplin*, and *The Naked Face*. The film runs for 115 minutes and earned over 4 million dollars domestically. The movie was nominated for a Saturn Award as Best Science Fiction film from the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror films. Katherine Ross, the main female character, won a Saturn award for Best Actress from the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror films.

## II. CONTROLLING THE 'OTHERNESS' OF WOMEN: GOOD VERSUS EVIL IN *FATAL ATTRACTION*

In *Fatal Attraction* Beth Gallagher is the young, middle-class housewife. Her husband, Dan Gallagher, carries on an affair with the female antagonist, book editor, Alex Forrest. When Dan decides to end the affair Alex responds by stalking and harassing the Gallagher family. Dan informs Beth about the affair because he fears Alex may continue to stalk his wife and daughter. Alex seeks revenge by attempting to murder Beth. Beth ultimately defends herself and her family by killing Alex.

*Fatal Attraction* demonstrates how both female characters, Alex and Beth, reinforce patriarchal structure and do not represent female empowerment. Although the female protagonist in *Fatal Attraction* is granted more access to power, as a human pitted against the antagonist, who is portrayed as a monster, she is ultimately not empowering for women. Beth acts out a traditional gender role by giving in to patriarchy whereas the antagonist represents feminism by holding a job outside the home. Although the characters juxtapose one another, neither Alex nor Beth has the power to break free from patriarchal bonds. Though both are oppressed, Beth is ultimately victorious because she represents what I have called, "less of an Other" whereas Alex represents "more of an Other," which is an expanded version of Simone de Beauvoir's application to the concept of the Other. My analysis also expands on Scholz's definition of empowerment by arguing that empowerment for women entails the individual's freedom from patriarchal

bonds *and also* the larger disruption of the hierarchy of power within patriarchy. Scholz contends that “Often when people are victimized by oppression, they fail to see their own power. The process of liberation then is also a process of empowerment – a freeing from the bonds that keep one from seeing and acting on or with one’s own power” (135).

Whereas I emphasize Scholz’s definition of empowerment, other scholars have a different view. These distinctive definitions of empowerment lead to different conclusions about female characters. One debate surrounding *Fatal Attraction* is whether Beth presents an empowering role for *womankind*. While some scholars argue against Beth’s empowerment as a housewife (Babener, Dow, Faludi, Kaplan, Joshel, Berland and Wechter), others suggest that the female protagonist illustrates a woman’s empowerment through motherhood and the traditional gender roles of wife and mother of the nuclear family (Jermyn).

Scholars studying *Fatal Attraction* explore how patriarchal power dominates both the female protagonist and the female antagonist. The film emphasizes the importance of marriage, the nuclear family, and the material comforts of a middle class lifestyle. The emphasis is clearly seen in the differences between Beth and Alex. Beth symbolizes a traditional [normal] housewife whereas Alex symbolizes a nontraditional [abnormal] career woman. Beth, as a housewife, has little, if any, individual power.

Many scholars suggest that *Fatal Attraction* does not present Beth as an empowering woman because she is confined to the roles of mother and housewife. These scholars and critics argue that the film conveys a misogynistic plot while reinstating patriarchal power over women (Babener, Davis, Berland and Wechter). I agree that the plot is misogynistic. It shows that men blame women for their actions and those of others.

The film divides these women into good [Beth] and evil [Alex] and has them fight one another instead of fighting patriarchy. In the last scene, a physical fight occurs between Beth and Alex that portrays the fight between the good woman (wife/mother) and the bad woman (career) (Bromley and Hewitt 19). The pitting of the characters against one another in this last scene presents a clear distinction of innocence from guilt. The homemaker is innocent while the career woman is evil. Patriarchal society encourages their fight, and punishes the career woman who defies gender norms. Although Alex is financially independent and sophisticated she is also portrayed as a psychopath: “socially isolated, selfish, unfulfilled and sexually aggressive” (Bromley and Hewitt 19). I agree with Bromley and Hewitt who suggest that because Alex is lonely and independent, as well as sexually aggressive, she is depicted as a psychopath. Further, I believe Alex’s decisions, and feminist values, challenge and threaten the patriarchal system by allowing her economic independence.

In contrast, Beth accepts gender norms and unpaid work in the home. Patriarchy is not threatened by Beth’s presence, and rewards her good behavior. Beth represents the obedient wife/mother character who murders the feminist character. As such, *Fatal Attraction* is an example of feminist backlash. Susan Faludi argues that feminist backlash faults feminism for the unhappiness of women. According to Faludi, “The ‘good mother’ wins and the independent [working] woman gets punished” (126). I argue that Faludi’s statement is true to the plot of the film where the good wife/mother wins over the bad working woman. It seems to me that *Fatal Attraction* provides one of the best opportunities for recognizing this distinction. Alex depicts the independent career woman and feminist who goes “crazy” by desiring to be a wife and mother. Alex is “crazy”

because she rejects the wife/mother role in favor of her career. Unlike Alex, Beth is stable. The film conveys the message that housewives are social and stable people, which Beth exemplifies through her actions. *Fatal Attraction* associates women's empowerment with the role of domestic housewife by making "the wife/mother role look stable and socially anchored" (Bromley and Hewitt 21). The film presents the stay-at-home mom as valued within society, and ultimately victorious against the career woman who threatens society.

Scholars who argue that Beth's character is empowering draw conclusions from Beth's apparent love for and happiness with her family. Throughout the film, Beth takes care of her family by fulfilling household duties such as cooking and entertaining. Liahna Babener explains, "[Beth] manages the family routine with finesse: spends quality time with her daughter, paints and decorates the new house, prepares *nouvelle cuisine*, entertains with style and ministers to Dan's wants with soft compliance" (27). This type of family routine is essential to maintain Beth's stability in society. Her role as a housewife serves two main functions: completing household tasks and supporting family with love and affection. But, I believe a housewife is limited in her freedom because her duties comprise of caring for the nuclear family, which only reinforces patriarchal power. Therefore, Beth does not break free from patriarchal bonds. Unlike Beth, Alex rejects these duties. This causes her to become an unstable, "crazy" woman, and so she must die. Patriarchy finds a way to obliterate the evil career woman from society (Joshel, Babener, Faludi, Kaplan, Bromley and Hewitt). I agree with these scholars who indicate that patriarchy removes the "crazy," unstable working woman from society, because she

represents a threat to the power structure, which is based upon a gender dichotomy in which women are submissive to male authority in the home and in the workplace.

Two themes in *Fatal Attraction* undercut female empowerment. First, scholars emphasize patriarchal control and power over female sexuality and womanhood. Secondly, they point out the failure of the female characters to dismantle the power structure of patriarchal hierarchy, leaving it intact. Both themes summarize how the film reestablishes the presence of the patriarchal nuclear family. The audience sees female characters lack power and control over their sexuality when Dan objectifies Alex and Beth. According to Kaplan, the nuclear family protects the wife's/mother's female sexuality from outside harm by other men (417). While I agree with Kaplan's statement, I add that Beth's husband has sole access to her body and sexuality. In the bedroom scene, Dan watches Beth comb her hair. When Dan gazes at Beth through the mirror, he objectifies her body and reduces her to a sex object. Using Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, Berland and Wechter argue that this scene fosters "male sexual arousal" (38) in both Dan and voyeuristic viewers.

I propose that unlike Beth [wife/mother], Alex [single woman] lacks protection and risks exposing her sexuality to outside harm. As a single woman, her body is at risk when she goes out in public because she has no protector. Patriarchal protection is one form of control over a woman's sexuality. Under patriarchal control, a woman loses her sexual autonomy. In the film, Dan becomes sexually aroused by Alex, who he meets at a publishing conference. At this conference Alex seduces Dan into a one-night stand. After the conference ends, Alex persistently contacts Dan at work and at home trying to coerce him into another night of passionate sex. Dan agrees and begins the affair. Even though

Dan plans to stay married, he continues exploiting Alex's body for his sexual pleasure. He symbolizes a patriarchy that simultaneously controls Alex's sexuality and the vulnerability of the single woman. The woman who acts as though she is sexually free will be punished, and will not be protected within patriarchy.

When Dan finally decides to end the stifling relationship, due to his moral conflict, Alex begins manipulating him by cutting her wrists. Although some scholars believe the wrist cutting is evident of Alex's lack of power, I will argue that it is a form of manipulation in which Alex *appears* to be empowering for women, because it is a form of rebellious act in which Alex attempts to make Dan feel obliged to remain in the relationship. At the same time, Dan does not want to remain in the relationship when Alex reveals her pregnancy. Dan questions whether he is the father and refuses to acknowledge responsibility for the child. Alex responds by demanding "recognition, reciprocity and respect [by Dan of the] shared male reproductive responsibility" (Davis 53). While Davis presents an accurate description of Alex's demands, Alex fails to achieve respect and parental responsibility from Dan, which results in a lack of female empowerment. By refusing to acknowledge the pregnancy, Dan denies any parental responsibility, and faults Alex for not taking birth control pills and getting pregnant.

When Dan offers to pay for an abortion, Alex declines because she wants to keep the baby. Dan refuses Alex's plea to create a new family. This worsens Dan's moral conflict (Dow 123). When Dan rejects Alex's plea, she turns into a psychopathic woman who stalks the Gallagher family. The film depicts Alex's plea as a "crazy" and illogical argument to which Dan's response is "reaffirmed as reasonable" (Berland and Wechter 40). I argue that this film sides with the patriarchal ideology that man is rational and

woman is irrational. *Fatal Attraction* overthrows Alex's "legitimate feminist argument" that Dan should take responsibility for his actions (Davis 54), failing to challenge Dan's traditional patriarchal ideology. This misogynistic plot *reinstates* patriarchal power over women. Dan's refusal to accept or even acknowledge shared responsibility is just one example of many. I argue that patriarchy upholds power and control over women to decide what is considered rational and irrational regarding a woman's reproductive rights. Therefore, Alex fails to become an empowering woman because she lacks power and control over her sexuality and womanhood. She becomes "crazy" when she is denied the domesticity (the nuclear family) she craves. In this way, the character seems to reinforce the naturalization of woman as nurturer. When a woman conforms to patriarchal standards she fails to disrupt the power relations of patriarchal hierarchy. Rather than competing against man she becomes rivals with another woman.

The competition culminates in the final scene. Alex and Beth tackle one another in the bathroom of the Gallagher home. Dan arrives and attempts to murder Alex by drowning her in the bathtub. Dow clarifies, "Yet, she is not dead, and rises terrifying from the water, only to be shot through the heart by Beth Gallagher, who has found the family gun" (123). *Fatal Attraction* identifies only one acceptable gender role for women, that of the wife/mother. Beth survives the fight because she embodies the traditional gender role of women in western patriarchy whereas Alex dies because she rejects this role. Therefore, a woman's only legitimate option is as a housewife. Alex's death symbolizes her punishment as a career woman and the societal rejection of this type of woman. Any woman who threatens the nuclear family through a career or through sexual



freedom will be eliminated. I argue that this is important to the concept of empowerment because Alex's feminist beliefs attempt to verbally challenge Dan's patriarchal position.

Dan's role as a patriarchal position is the axis around which Beth and Alex's roles are oriented. Thinking back to Beauvoir's application to the concept of the Other, *Fatal Attraction* illustrates the differences between gender roles and female empowerment. Simone de Beauvoir applies the concept of the Other to show the power dynamics between men and women in a patriarchal society. Men assume the dominant role and women pursue the subordinate role. In the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir states, "He is the subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (6). The Other signifies that women hold a secondary status to men, and women are always depicted as objects in relation to men. Otherness acts "in relation to an/other – and as it stands in opposition to that subject" (Berenstein 57). Beauvoir observes, "She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her" (21). The Other defines woman's role in patriarchy based on her biological parts. The social order of patriarchy is maintained through the construction of gender, and the perpetuation of gender norms (Lorber 5), and the female Other displays acceptable gender norms in society.

Although Beauvoir discusses the Other in the context of gender, I will apply the concept as it relates to species type. I argue that there is a dividing line between the human and the nonhuman (where the human is the normal figure and the nonhuman is the abnormal). In *Fatal Attraction*, the female protagonist is a human whereas the female antagonist is *presented as* a monstrous *nonhuman*. When the theory of the Other is applied, two distinct representations of the Other emerge. The protagonist symbolizes the human female Other while the antagonist characterizes the nonhuman Other. I suggest

that being human [normal] or nonhuman [abnormal] relates to a gender dichotomy. Alex is the monster [nonhuman] because she is the female who rejects and challenges traditional gender roles set forth by patriarchy. The monster is the evil woman, and the human is the good woman. Species type is applicable to the theory of the Other because Alex is the nonhuman psychopath in the human/nonhuman binary. The human Other and the nonhuman Other establish a competitive relationship with one another as the nonhuman dangerously stalks the human. Berenstein explains that many times the nonhuman exhibits a primitive nature and represents “an object of fear, derision and hatred” (57). The nonhuman is associated with nature harming humans and threatening society (Schelde 98). I explain that the human is ‘less of an Other,’ because when one is ‘less of an Other’ then one is less threatening to patriarchy. Three strategic scenes chosen from *Fatal Attraction* demonstrate the relationship between Beth and Alex as Others in society. The first and second scenes introduce the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. The third film scene depicts a direct, physical confrontation between the female characters.

In the first scene, Beth and her family arrive home and find the daughter’s pet rabbit cooking on the stove. Dan, who fears that his mistress has broken into the home and murdered the rabbit as revenge, confesses the affair to Beth. Once Dan acknowledges the affair, Beth threatens Alex over the phone. The second scene takes place the following day. Beth drives to the elementary school to pick up her daughter, but discovers the girl is missing. She immediately drives across town searching for her daughter while Alex takes Beth’s daughter to a carnival. The kidnapping represents Alex’s attempt at “surrogate motherhood” (Babener 33).

The bad Other and the good Other are commonly pitted against one another in science fiction and horror films. In these two scenes, the human interaction between human and nonhuman is indirect. The nonhuman uses violence and intimidation to terrify the human. The nonhuman breaks into the human's home, cooks the family rabbit, and kidnaps the daughter. This series of events exemplifies the chaos caused by Alex, the psychopathic character that must be destroyed. According to Belton, "An abnormal human being, [can be] a psychotic killer, a mad scientist, a Satanist, a mutant, or another unnatural being" (273). I believe the nonhuman Other can *appear* as a normal human being. It is behavior and psychopathic inclination that makes the human a nonhuman Other.

The conflict between the human and nonhuman Other begins when Beth arrives home. When the human finally learns of the nonhuman, she threatens the nonhuman over the phone by saying, "This is Beth Gallagher. If you ever come near my family again, I'll kill you, you understand?" Instead of heeding the human's warning, the nonhuman continues to stalk the family. Alex is horrifying because she is portrayed as a monster who threatens a child. In the next chapter on *Aliens*, I will discuss a similar scene sequence in which Ripley panics and runs through the complex in search of her non-biological daughter. Here, the nonhuman controls the situation by keeping the location of her and the human's daughter unknown. This lack of knowledge terrifies the human. Horror films tend to "generate horror, terror, or dread in the audience primarily through the figure of the monster and the threat it poses to humanity" (Belton 272). The nonhuman symbolizes the monster who invokes fear in the human and the audience. It is

my belief that in the human versus nonhuman storyline, the audience “roots” for the human instead of the dreadful nonhuman psychopath.

Next, I examine one reason why the psychopath’s Otherness is dangerous and threatening to human society. Per Schelde explains, nature portrays “vast, mysterious dangers and uncontrollable chaos” (14). The nonhuman creates a dangerous environment by first kidnapping the child, and later putting her on an adult roller coaster. As the roller coaster accelerates downward, the look on the child’s face is terror rather than pleasure. To the child, the nonhuman’s “crazy” actions are uncontrollable, unstoppable and nature-like. Her behavior is perilous, destructive, and difficult to control in society. Like nature, the psychopath’s behavior can disrupt the harmonious flow of human life. Unlike nature, her intentions in kidnapping the child convey malice for humankind. In contrast to these behaviors, I emphasize that the human female nurtures and values humanity. As a result, society prefers the human Other over the nonhuman Other.

The conflict between the human Other and nonhuman Other is grounded in a hierarchal structure. Through my concept of a revised hierarchy of power dynamics, one can better understand the conflict between the preferred human Other and the nonhuman Other. This revised hierarchy illustrates a binary relationship between species which Kim Edwards calls the “us/them” model. Edwards observes, “One [us] must always be privileged and empowered by virtue of its dominance and position: one must come first” (104). She is expounding on the difference between dominance and position where the human represents the powerful “us” that must come first and the nonhuman represents the weaker non-dominant “them.” This binary model divides power based on species.

Humans rank themselves above other nonhumans (Fjellstrom 64). Therefore, the “us/them” model establishes the dominance of the human over the nonhuman.

My concept of the revised hierarchy of power dynamics builds from the “us/them” model, and grants power based on three elements: species, sex, and service to patriarchy. These elements of patriarchal service, access to power, and hierarchal ranking are all interconnected concepts that establish differences between humans and nonhumans, proper and improper females. In the film, the human Other serves patriarchal needs and interests, and the man grants power to the human Other. This means that humans are favored over nonhumans, marking the nonhuman ‘more of an Other’ than the human. In this way, I apply a new interpretation to the concept of the Other when I suggest that a species is either ‘more of an Other’ or ‘less of an Other.’ Although the female Other is still an Other based on sex, the nonhuman female has less power based on combined characteristics of species and sex. In turn, the man grants power to the female for her good behavior when the female serves patriarchal needs and interests. With some access to power, the human female moves further up the hierarchy than the nonhuman female, and this movement reveals that she is ‘less of an Other’ than the nonhuman. Although both females are confined to the sphere of the Other, one still achieves power over another. Based on the revised hierarchy, the female protagonist stands a greater chance at challenging and disrupting patriarchy with individual power. But, the human female Other utilizes her power to murder the nonhuman female.

In the third and final scene that I analyze, there is a direct confrontation between the protagonist and the antagonist. It is at this point in the film that Alex fully embodies the monstrous feminine. Barbara Creed identifies the monstrous feminine in horror films

as “a form of [nonhuman] femininity that is being fought” (qtd. in Gremler 3) by the female protagonist who must defeat the psychopathic monster. The nonhuman Other is the monstrous feminine who fights out of rage, jealousy, and revenge. The final scene in *Fatal Attraction* is the deadly fight between the human and the nonhuman fighting for survival and victory. The nonhuman is the dangerous Other who secretly breaks into the human’s home and catches the human in a vulnerable state. In this scene, Alex breaks into the home and attacks Beth in the bathroom. Defenseless, the human slowly backs away, but the nonhuman continues her assault. Dan hears the commotion and rushes into the bathroom grabbing Alex. Finally, Beth grabs the family gun and shoots Alex.

I emphasize that the audience “roots” for the survival of the human because the nonhuman has become evil. The audience applauds the human’s courage in destroying the nonhuman since she is ‘less of an Other.’ The human embodies ‘less of an Other’ because she values human life, is obedient and nonviolent, and does less harm to humans. Therefore, Beth’s Otherness remains controlled by society making her the preferred Other. Human males reward the human female Other with power in the revised hierarchy of power relations. When one is ‘less of an Other’ then one is less threatening to human society. Her Otherness is controlled by patriarchy whereas the nonhuman’s [psychopath] Otherness is difficult to control.

I argue that the human female serves patriarchal needs and interests by supporting and protecting the patriarchal nuclear family. Unlike the human, the nonhuman threatens the patriarchal nuclear family and destabilizes this social order (Bromley and Hewitt 23). For this reason, the human female benefits from the revised hierarchy of power dynamics. Power allows the human female Other to murder the nonhuman female Other.

This destroys the nonhuman and gives power to the human. I believe the human attacks the nonhuman in self-defense. Beth smacks Alex across the face, knocking her over and sending the knife sliding across the floor. When Alex appears lifeless underneath the water, she suddenly springs from the bathtub alive again, but Beth shoots her in the chest. This is the shot that kills Alex, and she falls back into the bathtub with blood flowing from her chest. In the final battle, the nonhuman dies, and the human is victorious. When both female Others defend their species in this finale, the nonhuman Other—the psychopathic monster—must be destroyed. The abominable act of murder is celebrated when it protects patriarchy. Conventional science fiction and horror film endings conform to the revised hierarchy of power relations where the human often, if not always, triumphs.

Science fiction and horror films commonly draw a parallel between human triumph and nonhuman destruction. Humans triumph and murder nonhumans since humanity fears the unknown capabilities of the outsiders. Patricia Melzer explains there is a constant reminder in films between the “unknown and the known” (3) where different species display distinctive capabilities and strengths. The “known” represents human ability while the “unknown” represents nonhuman ability. Applying this idea of the unknown to the final scene of *Fatal Attraction* reveals that the nonhuman Other exhibits unknown abilities. After drowning in the bathtub, the nonhuman is presumed dead. However, she surprises the human by jumping up from the bathtub fully alive. Berland and Wechter explain this phenomenon. A common characteristic found in slasher and horror films involves killing the monster [psychopath] twice (41). The humans must kill the nonhuman twice in order to completely destroy their evil Otherness. Barry Grant

explains that with the death of the monster, harmony and tranquility are restored to society (24), because the restoration of the nuclear family represents this harmony.

With the demise of the nonhuman in *Fatal Attraction*, the dominant system of the human race remains intact. I suggest that the psychopath's death marks her failure to dismantle the domineering power of the species. So, humans continue to remain a closed and fixed society where nonhuman monsters are unwelcome. The nonhuman's Otherness threatens both the human female Other and the human male. Using my expanded version of Scholz's definition of empowerment, I claim that neither female Other dismantles the hierarchy of patriarchal power. The revised hierarchy of power relations still ranks female Others in relation to one another with man remaining on top. Therefore, the female Others never achieve full access to power to disrupt patriarchal society. Since the revised hierarchy of power dynamics remains intact with females characterized as subordinate to males, *Fatal Attraction* fails to represent an empowering female protagonist. Instead, even though the female protagonist is allowed more access to power as a human being pitted against the antagonist, she is ultimately not empowering for women because she supports patriarchy. The potential for female empowerment is stripped away by patriarchy through an emphasis on humanity. As I address in the following chapters, *Fatal Attraction* is not alone in relying on this disempowering trend for women. *Aliens* and *The Stepford Wives* also rely on a speciesist base to subjugate the female population.



### III. DESTROYING THE MONSTROUS QUEEN: SPECIESISM AND THE REINSTATMENT OF PATRIARCHY IN *ALIENS*

*Aliens* (1986), the sequel to *Alien* (1979), centers on Ellen Ripley, a civilian advisor to the Weyland-Yutani Company. Ripley is the lone survivor of a prior company mission during which a hostile alien species destroys her crew. When Ripley is awakened from cryogenic stasis, she is greeted by an employee named Burke who convinces her to join a rescue mission. The mission will be to rescue human survivors on a hostile planet, which previously hosted a successful colony until overtaken by the same alien species Ripley encountered on her last mission. Ripley joins a military crew that includes eleven men, one woman, and a robot. When the crew lands on Planet LV-426, the marines are attacked by aliens. Ripley and the team fight off the aliens and find one human survivor, a young girl nicknamed Newt, and Ripley ultimately endures several more alien attacks. In the final scene, Ripley battles the alien queen and escapes from the planet with the last remaining crew survivors: Newt, Bishop, and Corporal Hicks.

*Aliens* analyzes the power dynamics between the females of two species and reveals how human females maintain power over nonhuman females. The female protagonist in *Aliens* is ultimately not empowering for women (even though she is granted more access to power as a human being pitted against the alien) because she supports the patriarchal structure. The protagonist embodies the conventional gender role (giving in to patriarchy) whereas the antagonist represents neither a feminist nor an anti-

feminist. The alien antagonist is a threat to human patriarchy because she is a matriarch who holds power over both male aliens and male humans. In spite of the character's oppression, Ripley is still victorious in the film because she represents what I coin, "less of an Other" whereas the alien queen represents "more of an Other." I will expand on my analysis using Beauvoir's application of the concept of the Other and my expanded notion of Scholz's definition of empowerment in which women are only empowering when they disrupt the patriarchal system. I argue that the female protagonist fails to break free from patriarchal bonds and dismantle the hierarchy of power. Patriarchy relies on a gender dichotomy to maintain a hierarchy of power. Many scholars debate whether Ripley, the female protagonist, presents an empowering role for *womankind*. While some scholars argue against Ripley's empowerment, other scholars suggest the female protagonist illustrates a woman's empowerment in two ways: through 1) a traditional maternal role and 2) a nontraditional leadership role. Unlike the damsel in distress, Ripley displays characteristics of a mother, a leader, and a fighter. Ripley's role is iconic since she represents maternity as well as the independent tough woman who conveys power over her sexuality and reproduction (Gibson 41). Her character symbolizes one of the first significant female leads in science fiction and horror film.

At first, Ripley exhibits a maternal role. When the crew finds a young girl living under the flooring of the complex, Ripley rescues the child. She adopts Newt as her own, and the young girl becomes her non-biological daughter (Bach and Langer 89). This is significant because her biological daughter, and the rest of her family died while Ripley was in hypersleep, and Newt resembles Ripley's biological daughter. Peter Wood clarifies, "Newt is roughly the age of Ripley's daughter when Ripley left Earth and the

film explicitly pairs the two as mother and daughter” (50). In many scenes, Ripley holds onto Newt as the complex is invaded by aliens. I relate this back to *Fatal Attraction* when Beth attempts to protect her child as they are stalked by the psychopath. In another scene of *Aliens*, Ripley and Newt work together to fight the aliens in the infirmary. Janice Rushing claims that the characters demonstrate empowering qualities as they work together to survive and to defeat the aliens. According to Rushing, Ripley and Newt integrate “heroic traits - they are smart, competent, moral and courageous” females (17). A strong maternal character embraces these heroic traits. Thus, Ripley’s maternal characteristics enhance the empowering roles of leader and fighter. However, I argue that Ripley is not an empowering figure for women because she does not utilize these characteristics to disrupt the hierarchy of patriarchal power. Instead, they are used to destroy that which threatens patriarchy.

Many scholars believe that Ripley as the protagonist demonstrates an unusual role, as leader and fighter, for women in science fiction and horror films (Bell-Metereau, Graham, Hills, Knight, Rushing, Bach and Langer). Bach and Langer claim Ripley displays “authoritative and powerful” qualities throughout the film (83). While Bach and Langer argue that Ripley portrays these qualities, I argue that the potential power of these qualities is undermined by Ripley’s submission to the patriarchal Weyland-Yutani Company, which demands the destruction of the aliens. Instead of the silent helpless victim, scholars believe that Ripley exhibits a strong demeanor that challenges male authority. She illustrates her empowering leadership through warrior-like qualities and defiance. During multiple alien invasions, Ripley fights alongside the marines as a soldier, although she is only a civilian advisor. When Sergeant Apone is killed, and

Lieutenant Gorman wounded, Ripley takes over as commander of the crew. In that capacity, she is respected by her crew who obey her direct orders and listen to her input about the aliens. As a leader she is heard and recognized as an individual with valuable insight and knowledge.

In contrast, I point out that at the beginning of the film the men view her as *just* a woman and *just* a civilian. This is seen when Ripley provides her knowledge about the aliens at a morning briefing and the crew responds with laughter and sarcasm. As Gallardo and Smith explain, “She rattles her chains loudly, filling the void of silence imposed on women by male narratives. She may not get entirely free, but she is seen, she is heard and she is remembered” (4). I agree with Gallardo and Smith when they suggest that Ripley is remembered *even though* she is not “entirely free.” Ripley does not break free from patriarchal bonds because she is still under orders from her employer, the Weyland-Yutani Company. Finally, as a woman in a leadership role, Ripley is noticed and heard among the predominately male crew who acknowledge her presence. For instance, Private Hudson acknowledges and listens to Ripley’s orders when she assigns him the task of searching for floor plans covering the entire complex. Once Hudson provides the floor plans, Ripley familiarizes herself with the layout, providing suggestions on how to cut off access points to stop the aliens. She then strategizes with Corporal Hicks, the male protagonist, to seal off barricades and vents to stop the aliens from entering their section of the complex.

Ripley’s strong female presence is taken seriously by all crew members except Burke, who goes behind her back in an attempt to exploit her body and reproductive system. This occurs while Ripley and Newt nap in the infirmary soon after Newt’s

rescue. Burke, who is representative of patriarchy, secretly plants an alien creature inside the room with hopes of impregnating both females in order to “control the means of alien production by controlling the means of Ripley’s reproduction” (Bach and Langer 88). If he controls female reproduction, then he controls the production of alien species. The ability to do so would generate revenue for the Weyland-Yutani Company. When Ripley learns of Burke’s role in the attack, she throws him against a wall and verbally attacks him. His greed symbolizes the patriarchal attempt to control reproduction. Scholars believe Burke underestimates Ripley’s power as a woman and fails to exploit/profit from female reproduction, whereas I assert that patriarchy profits from Ripley in other ways. In this case, patriarchy exploits and manipulates Ripley, who appears to have powerful, aggressive, and violent characteristics, by having *her* destroy the aliens. Thus, when Ripley destroys the aliens, she is being exploited to maintain and reinstate patriarchal power.

Burke illustrates one form of patriarchal power in the film. I argue that the aliens, the [male] marines, and the Weyland-Yutani Company also exhibit patriarchal power. Each patriarchal character maintains dominance over others, specifically over Ripley. Since Ripley is employed by the Weyland-Yutani Company, she is under their power and control. The Weyland-Yutani Company is in charge of the mission and the execution of the aliens on Planet LV-426. The [male] marines are employed by the Weyland-Yutani Company and perform duties as assigned. Each patriarchal character has power over Ripley’s body, sexuality, reproduction, and survival. Hence, Susan Jeffords claims the film presents a confrontation between feminism and patriarchy where the feminist tries to fight, survive, and obliterate the many forms of patriarchal power (74). I agree with

Jeffords' analysis of the film. As the feminist, Ripley *tries* to fight and survive in an attempt to dismantle male-dominated power. Through her efforts, Ripley depicts a woman who is "intelligent, resourceful, independent, [and] able to take command" (Jeffords 73). Whereas Jeffords believes Ripley has these qualities, I suggest that these qualities are only used to show how the feminist *appears* to be in control and have power, but in actuality she falls victim to patriarchy as represented by the Weyland-Yutani Company, the marines, and the aliens.

However, some scholars believe Ripley defies patriarchal power embodied by the marines during the first alien attack at the complex when she does not obey a cease order. When the marines are dispatched into the complex to search for survivors, the remaining crew monitors them from the "armored personnel carrier APC" military vehicle (Gallardo and Smith 69). From inside the APC, Ripley, Burke, Bishop, and Lieutenant Gorman watch the marines as they are attacked by aliens. Ripley decides to rescue the team. Lieutenant Gorman refuses to act on Ripley's suggestion and they argue. Lieutenant Gorman outranks Ripley, and establishes his patriarchal control. Ripley verbally and physically challenges his authority by taking control of the vehicle. This is the first time the audience views Ripley not only taking control of a masculine military vehicle, but also blatantly challenging patriarchy. Gladys Knight describes, "She takes the helm of the vehicle despite her fear, charging right through the walls of the colony complex" (106). Ripley's verbal and physical defiance of Lieutenant Gorman's authority initiates the rescue mission. Even though Ripley challenge's his authority, I suggest that both characters are on the same team and work together to kill the aliens, which is a goal set

forth by the Weyland-Yutani Company, who holds the highest patriarchal authority. Because of this, Ripley is still under the reign of patriarchal power.

Within my argument, as long as Ripley remains under the reign of patriarchal power, she cannot be empowering; only if her leadership disrupts the hierarchy of patriarchal power can she be deemed to be empowering for women. Nevertheless, some scholars point out that she fights with weapons typically associated with traditional masculinity (Knight, Brown, Helford, Scobie). This is represented in another alien attack scene that places the crew in danger. The crew seals off a section of the complex in hopes of defending themselves against an anticipated alien attack. Private Hudson monitors the meter readings to indicate the alien's location within the complex. Despite Private Hudson's monitoring, the aliens break through the ceiling and the crew open fire. When the creatures advance, Ripley joins the fight in order to defend Newt. Noticing the number of aliens coming through the ceiling, she orders the crew to retreat to the medical room. She exhibits signs of a "natural leader" who fights and perspires alongside the marines (Bell-Metereau 16) while ordering her crew to safety. But, I argue that Ripley's leadership abilities are exploited by patriarchy to reinforce the company's power. Ripley is doing what she is told to do when she attacks the aliens who threaten the company.

In this situation, Ripley seems to challenge a form of patriarchal representation. Instead of giving up as a helpless victim, she fights for her rights, power, and control. Knight states that Ripley is not a "sidekick, and she is certainly no one's victim" (98). In western culture, a victim is often associated with passivity. In turn, the ideal woman is passive. Passivity contributes to the victimization of the feminine. Women who refuse to behave in a passive manner are seen as challenging patriarchal power and thus

representing feminism. To challenge gender inequality, Ripley not only stands up for herself verbally, by arguing with Lieutenant Gorman, and nonverbally, by taking control of the military vehicle, but she also learns to use masculine weapons. Corporal Hicks teaches Ripley how to operate military weapons used by the marines. Once Ripley learns how to use these weapons, she *appears* to wield power against patriarchy including the marines.

Scholars interpret these weapons as symbols of masculinity, claiming Ripley portrays a strong, aggressive woman with masculine characteristics. Ripley's masculinity is represented by her use of guns and muscles. Traditionally, only men exhibited masculinity through aggression and strength. Popular culture responded to Ripley's masculine characteristics by giving her the nicknames, "Fembo" and "Rambolina" which parodies of another popular character at the time, Rambo (Brown 57). I agree that Ripley mimics Rambo's hyper-masculine image of physical strength, guns, and muscles, and suggest that Ripley is not empowering for women by her hyper-masculinity. According to Scobie, the act of going by one's last name is directly related to masculinity. She claims Ripley identifies with her last name instead of her first name, which is similar to how the marines identify with one another (85). Therefore, I state that Ripley acts [fighting] and identifies [by name] as masculine, thus withdrawing from her femininity, which is imposed upon her.

While many scholars argue that the masculine characteristics of strength, aggression, and determination empower Ripley as a woman, I disagree because embodying masculine characteristics does nothing to obtain gender equality. Instead, it devalues the feminine by favoring the masculine. That said, the general consensus



surrounding Ripley's masculine characteristics suggest that they are empowering. Elizabeth Hills offers a unique analysis of this debate, claiming that Ripley's strong characteristics resemble a new type of femininity that does not emphasize masculinity. According to Hills, "Ripley assumes the 'so called' masculine privilege of active subjectivity through the process of becoming an active heroine, she is neither imitating men nor 'becoming a man'" (45). As seen through this new lens provided by Hills, Ripley's active subjectivity redefines femininity. However, I argue that because Ripley's masculine qualities are given primacy, her character does not progress beyond masculine imitation. For this reason, I claim that Ripley is not empowering for women as a warrior [a leader], or as a maternal mother because these traits function to maintain patriarchy.

The last scene demonstrates the controversy surrounding Ripley's qualities. Specifically, Ripley rescues Bishop, Newt, and Corporal Hicks after defeating the alien queen. Ripley portrays a "cool, resourceful, courageous" woman (Scobie 82) who destroys the evil queen without male assistance. I argue that this final act symbolizes the reinforcement of patriarchal power because Ripley destroys the final threat to patriarchy. Bell-Metereau mentions that Ripley "prevails, in part because she is tough minded and sensible in the face of danger" (18). Although I agree with Bell-Metereau's assessment of why Ripley prevails, I reiterate that such qualities emphasize her macho characteristics. In the end, Ripley escapes danger, rescues her crew, and saves the male protagonist (who would normally act as the hero/savior). Traditionally, in action films, the storyline follows one pattern: man meets woman, woman gets in trouble, man rescues woman, and man/woman live happily ever after. In other words, man-exists-as-savior-of-the-female-victim is a popular motif. However, the relationship between Ripley and Corporal Hicks

represents a reversal of gender roles for the female and male protagonist. Graham claims Ripley's character is "an autonomous individual who is not limited by the constraints of gender role expectations" (6).

On the other hand, I agree with scholars who argue that Ripley is not empowering for women because she remains handicapped by her sex and gender in patriarchal society. Ripley lives in a society that socializes women to embrace traditional gender roles. I argue that the film presents Ripley as an empowering woman liberated from the patriarchal system when in actuality her "empowerment" reestablishes gender values, specifically her role as mother/nurturer. Wood states, "Ripley remains bounded by the structures and gender rules of a sexist society, creating an equation that just doesn't add up" (41). The equation Wood refers to is Ripley's "empowering" masculine characteristics and "unempowering" feminine characteristics. Although Ripley chooses the masculine, she is forced into the feminine. I point out that Ripley partakes in mothering Newt and protecting her crew from danger since society socializes women into serving patriarchal desires. One of the men could have easily cared for Newt, but this clearly was not an option. In other words, Ripley embodies both the masculine and the feminine and both sets of gendered characters are exploited by patriarchy.

Ripley's feminine characteristics and role are dominant at the end of the film with the emphasis on the family. According to Berenstein, "An (implied) white, bourgeois nuclear family" reigns victorious with the defeat of the nonhuman species (60). This family consists of Ripley, Corporal Hicks, and Newt and follows the established "strong and nurturing mother, sensitive and wounded father, and battered but enduring child" pattern (Jeffords 76). The family described here by Jeffords is a form of the patriarchal

nuclear family, and, within my argument, the film's validation of this familial form is an example of the continuation of patriarchal power over women. I agree with the scholars who emphasize the lack of power given to the female protagonist and claim that whatever power *does* exist is stripped away from Ripley at the end. When the finale reveals the surviving presence of a patriarchal family, the female protagonist is cast into the mother role with limited or no societal power. Without societal power, Ripley fails to dismantle the patriarchal system. Therefore, she reinstates patriarchy and does not offer an empowering image for women. The triumph of the nuclear family is evident in both *Aliens* and *Fatal Attraction*. In both films, the wife/mother figure destroys the nonhuman [alien queen and psychopath]. When the wife/mother survives, so does the patriarchal nuclear family. Both Ripley [*Aliens*] and Beth [*Fatal Attraction*] support and protect the nuclear family from the nonhuman, thus appropriating individual power.

In my analysis of *Aliens*, the female protagonist achieves access to *individual* power as a human and attains greater power as an individual fighting for *humankind*. I contend that Ripley's individual power is constrained by her service to patriarchy. If Ripley did not serve the patriarchy, then she would have no power at all. Although Ripley is immediately seen as challenging patriarchy, she still upholds it by supporting the nuclear family. In short, she fights for the perseverance of humanity, and, in doing so, upholds a sexist rhetoric. To further illustrate this idea, I apply the concepts of the Other and speciesism to the film. Speciesism illustrates the preference for humans over nonhuman *animals*.

Traditionally, speciesism has been used for studying animal rights. Scholars who research and utilize speciesism agree upon the idea that human species holds a prejudice

toward nonhuman species. Peter Singer and Richard Ryder are prominent scholars who present two working definitions of speciesism. Singer identifies speciesism as an “attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (qtd. in Fjellstrom 64). Speciesism is the idea that humans discriminate against nonhuman species. Ryder “draw[s] a parallel between it and racism” (qtd. in Fjellstrom 64). I apply their definitions of speciesism to the film. I expand on speciesism to include nonhuman *aliens*. I chose three film scenes from *Aliens* to depict the conflict between Ripley and the alien queen as female Others and species Others. Ripley represents the human, female Other while the alien queen characterizes the nonhuman Other. The first scene uses the alien queen’s progeny to establish the conflict between the female protagonist and the female antagonist. The second scene involves the first direct conflict between the female protagonist and the antagonist. Finally, the third scene is the final battle that concludes the speciesist dilemma and reinstates the patriarchal nuclear family.

In the first scene, an alien creature suddenly jumps onto Ripley’s face after she and Newt awaken from their nap in the infirmary. Ripley struggles to fight off the alien. The alien is a representative of the alien queen and thus functions to introduce the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist. The protagonist fights the alien queen’s offspring known as “facehuggers.” The facehuggers represent the queen in this instance, and continue to attack Ripley until they have her caught by the face and neck.

Ripley throws the alien off, and she and Newt try to escape. Ripley and Newt pound on the walls and shout for help, but the alien creature continues to attack and jumps on Ripley. Ripley and Newt fight the two alien creatures until the crew forces their

way inside the infirmary. I suggest that when the crew bursts into the infirmary to shoot the facehuggers, the audience “roots” for human survival. In order for victory to occur, the human must destroy the evil nonhumans. According to Frey, humans contain more valuable lives than nonhumans (192), and the audience cheers for the humans whose lives appear significant compared to nonhuman lives. Through my concept of a revised hierarchy of power dynamics, humans and nonhumans are ranked on a descending/ascending scale. This hierarchy establishes power dynamics between species. In other words, humans are better than nonhumans. When applied to science fiction and horror films, nonhumans include monsters, aliens and robots.

In the hierarchy, humans are on top while aliens are at the bottom. I propose that the human achieves greater access to individual power. The fact that the protagonist is human allows her to gain victory over the facehuggers who are the nonhuman Others. The human is above the nonhuman and works to keep the hierarchy in place. The human female acquires superiority and favoritism over the facehugger because she is ‘less of an Other.’ When a woman is ‘less of an Other,’ patriarchy perceives her as less threatening. This hierarchy is based on male superiority. Human males hold more power than human females and nonhuman females. Science fiction and horror films often adopt a storyline where humans exploit aliens, because they lack that coveted humanity. The portrayal of the nonhuman in *Aliens* reflects a speciesist interpretation of nonhuman creatures by portraying aliens as unintelligent and unimportant.

My analysis of *Aliens* confirms that the alien creatures are not given moral consideration by the humans in the film. According to Singer, moral consideration suggests “valuing typically superior human intelligence so highly that the interest and

suffering of animals [nonhumans] are considered morally insignificant” (qtd. in Sapontzis 99). Singer explains that speciesism creates an unfair dividing line between human and nonhuman intellect whereby human intelligence is regarded as valuable, moral, and superior. This dividing line between human intellect and nonhuman intellect is acknowledged within my argument and applied to the treatment of human male intellect and human female intellect. Within patriarchy, human intelligence includes logic and emotion, whereas emotional traits are construed as feminine and therefore devalued. According to the speciesist ideology, moral consideration corresponds to human intellect, human characteristics, and value. From a perspective of speciesism, humans are the only moral and valuable species. Evelyn Pluhar states, “Humans, it is often claimed, are the most morally valuable (perhaps the only morally valuable) beings” (83). Thus, nonhumans rarely achieve equal status among humans and instead reflect an unequal distribution of idealized morality (Dunayer 90). To give a nonhuman species moral consideration implies they possess characteristics such as physical appearance, cognition, and behavior. In order to justify human violence, and satisfy morality, the Other must be dehumanized. Because facehuggers lack human characteristics, they also lack moral consideration, and humans can justifiably kill them.

When humans utilize the power to destroy the nonhuman, they practice speciesism. I propose that when humans practice speciesism, they do so in self-interest and through interest convergence. The concept of interest convergence is found within Critical Race Theory and identifies racism and discrimination between groups in society. Discrimination functions in society when one group dominates or controls another group. David Gillborn and Nicola Rollock describe interest convergence and racism in terms of

power. Gillborn and Rollock claim, “Racism serves to reinforce and advance White Supremacy, helping to maintain a status quo that while disproportionate or inequitable to racial minorities allows Whites to retain their positions of power” (3). As Lev states, nonhumans symbolize a danger to humanity (32), which is often an association made with racism. Traditionally, the concept of interest convergence applies to *racial* groups.

In my analysis of interest convergence, I use a new interpretation that extends to *species* groups as well. The application of interest convergence to species groups within *Aliens* reveals the dynamics of the relationship between the humans and the aliens in the film. The application of interest convergence also reveals the relational dynamics between patriarchy and Ripley, as well as between Ripley and the aliens. Ripley is a “lesser human” in relation to men. She is granted more power as an individual only when it benefits patriarchy and disenfranchises the nonhuman population. Both the human female and nonhuman female are discriminated against by patriarchy. However, instead of fighting together, the two female Others [Ripley and the alien queen] work against one another based on differences in species. Edwards explains why these two female Others refuse to converge interests and work together. My interpretation of the characters is that Ripley sees the alien Other as ‘more of an Other’ than herself. Edwards states, “The very word ‘alien’ signifies other and outsider” (107). Ripley views the alien Other as an outsider and, therefore, she is speciesist. The nonhuman’s Otherness is more threatening to society, while the human’s Otherness only evokes a minor threat.

I address this conflict of interest in the second scene as well. This scene introduces the first physical interaction between the female protagonist and the female antagonist. Upon discovering the queen’s nest, Ripley fires a flamethrower and ignites a

section of unhatched eggs. Then, as she and Newt escape, Ripley tosses a sack of grenades into the alien queen's nest. In this scene, the female protagonist [human] and the female antagonist [alien queen] represent different species and different Others. The human female Other confronts the nonhuman female Other. The nonhuman Other appears in the form of a monstrous alien whose body is so massive that it covers an entire wall from floor to ceiling. When the human enters the alien's nest, she notices the length of the alien's body and seeks to protect herself before being attacked. The human Other acts fearless in the face of danger; she grabs her weapon and fires at the nest without hesitation. Lynda Bundtzen explains that in this instance, "[The human] appears to have lost all control, torching every Alien egg in sight" (106). Without waiting for the alien to attack first, the human destroys the hatchery. The alien queen hisses angrily as Ripley continues to attack eggs, but the explosions draw the attention of adult aliens. Ripley attacks them before firing at the alien queen.

The audience "roots" for Ripley because she is human and therefore, 'less of an Other' than the nonhuman. My application of speciesism helps explain why the audience "roots" for the human over the nonhuman. The human slaughters the monstrous alien's offspring to prevent the continuation of the alien species. The human Other targets the abdomen of the nonhuman Other, specifically pinpointing the womb. When firing at the womb, the human causes damage to the nonhuman Other's reproductive system. I read this symbolically as Ripley destroying femininity, as the womb is a symbol of womanhood. While destroying womanhood, she metaphorically becomes a man. Furthermore, impairment in the womb causes a disruption in the birth of future aliens. The audience applauds the damage done to the alien's abdomen and continuously "roots"



for the human Other for upholding both morality and humanity. While destroying the nest and harming the nonhuman Other, the human Other engages in speciesist activity that harms nonhumans.

I point out that in *Aliens*, the human conducts a mass murder of unborn aliens and also harms the alien queen. According to Wynne-Tyson: humans kill, detain, exploit or torment animals through arrogance and superiority (46). The human's actions demonstrate her general sense of human superiority, and her specific belief that the alien female is not entitled to basic rights, such as reproductive autonomy. Basic rights pertain to the value and livelihood of a species, which is passed through children. Ideally, humans attain full basic rights simply because they are members of the human race (Pluhar 85). It is my belief that when the human Other ignites the nest, she never questions the rights of the nonhuman Other. Instead, she disregards the monstrous alien's rights as well as her physical pain when the alien's offspring is demolished and her reproductive system damaged. When discussing speciesism, Singer observes that when animals [nonhumans] are tortured and slaughtered their pain is irrelevant to humans (qtd. in Sapontzis 99). Human pain is viewed as more significant than nonhuman pain according to speciesism. In the first confrontation between Ripley and the queen, the human survives relatively unscathed while the nonhuman suffers. I assert that the human ignores the nonhuman's pain and obliterates the eggs out of the superior and narcissistic belief that she holds basic rights over the nonhuman's reproductive system. Melzer clarifies that in many science fiction and horror films, the alien Other is subjugated and dominated by the human race (114) as a result of speciesism. In the conflict between Ripley and the queen, species concerns take precedence over gender concerns, leading

two females to attempt to destroy one another. Recognizing her subordinate position within patriarchy, the human female will inflict harm upon the nonhuman female in an attempt to acquire some measure of power.

In the second analyzed scene, men [the Weyland-Yutani Company] grant the human Other individual power to defeat the nonhuman Other. They do this by choosing to follow her lead. In a sense, men exploit the human female by urging her to provoke and harm the nonhuman. There seems to be a parallel between speciesism and sexism where human males exploit human females and human females exploit nonhuman females. The overall discrimination is united by the human males' use of sexism and the human female's use of speciesism. Human males impose sexism on the human female, and the human female imposes speciesism on the nonhuman. Joan Dunayer suggests a parallel among speciesism, sexism and racism. She claims, "It's racist to give greater weight to the interests of whites than nonwhites, sexist to give greater weight to the interests of males than females, and speciesist to give greater weight to the interests of humans than nonhumans for *any* reason" (3). Giving greater weight to one particular sex, race, or species leads to discrimination and exploitation. Discriminating against a species group is no different than discriminating against people based on their sex (Pluhar 85). Just as sexism dictates that sex type will mark an individual human's status in society, so also does speciesism dictate that species type will determine an individual being's societal status. Within patriarchy, the human female is marked for domination by the human male; however, *Aliens* suggests that the human female can gain power and status by establishing victory over the nonhuman female. The way in which the human female

can acquire greater, although still limited, individual power, by conquering the nonhuman female reveals the relationship between sexism and speciesism.

All of the analyzed themes I discussed so far include Ripley acting as a leader, a fighter, and a mother figure. The final scenes of the film begin with Ripley, Newt, Corporal Hicks, and robot Bishop preparing to head home on the *Sulaco* and end with Ripley securing the safety of their escape vessel by ejecting the alien queen into space. The final scene in *Aliens* represents the deadly conflict between the human and the nonhuman fighting for survival and victory. I examine how both female Others fight one another using physical strength. The nonhuman Other uses beastly strength against the human who must rely on a mechanical loader to assert strength. The mechanical loader is “a gargantuan hunk of steel armor used for moving industrial supplies” (Rushing 18) and is used by the military to lift and push heavy objects. Inside the mechanical machinery, the human looks equal in size to the monstrous alien. In this scene, Edwards describes both females as “large and lumbering creatures” in stature (108). The human Other thus takes on qualities of the monstrous in order to defeat the nonhuman Other. Ripley grabs the alien with the loader’s claws. I claim that Ripley’s appropriation of monstrous qualities further emphasizes her Otherness for the audience and thus adds a sense of irony to her struggle to save humanity.

Although Ripley metaphorically portrays monstrous characteristics, the alien is the physical embodiment of monstrosity. Specifically, the alien has a “tough exterior, acid for blood, razor sharp teeth set in a retractable mouth, super strength and quick speed” (Knight 103). Although the alien does seem to be winning the fight at various points, the human is the clear victor at the end. Ripley’s forced exit from the loader works

in her favor as her smaller size allows her to escape the elevator shaft into which she and the queen have fallen. When the human escapes the vehicle, she is no longer equal to the alien's size and strength. According to Jeffords, "[The human] cannot rely on man-made machinery anymore and must face the alien with a substantially smaller body" (74). Here, however, the human's small body is an advantage as she climbs the ladder to escape.

The human triumphs in this scene as a result of speciesism. According to speciesists, humans contain specific characteristics not observable in other species and gain victory over nonhumans based on these characteristics (Steinbock 254). Edwards illustrates this concept using the model of "us and them," which differentiates between the characteristics of humans and nonhumans (103). I use Edwards' model in this scene where the human Other ("us") is more significant than the nonhuman Other ("them"). One speciesist distinction between humans and nonhumans is found in conceptualizations of intelligence (Steinbock 253). Human intelligence consists of rationality, reason, and abstract thought. Speciesists claim human cognitive ability exceeds nonhuman intellect (Dunayer 87). When I apply this notion to *Aliens*, the human Other represents greater intellect than the nonhuman Other. The human Other deduces strength is not the solution to defeating the nonhuman Other, but that she must instead use logic and reasoning to achieve victory. When utilizing logic, Ripley is taking on a masculinized role, as logic is typically associated with masculinity whereas emotion is attached to femininity. She activates the exterior doors and defeats the alien by relying on her own cunning. In contrast, the alien queen relies on her baser instincts and emotions, which are the antithesis of logic. In other words, Ripley's use of logic is contrasted with the queen's instinctual strategy and responses.

The application of speciesism allows us to better understand why the human wins this fight against the alien, just as the application of interest convergence helps us to better understand why the human and the alien must fight at all. Tension manifests between the human and the alien, and neither species are able to join an alliance to fight the patriarchal system. Instead, the human Other [Ripley] battles the nonhuman Other [alien queen] and protects patriarchal society [the Weyland-Yutani Company]. She converges interests with patriarchal society by servicing their needs and the interests of humankind. According to my analysis, interest convergence and speciesism merge in this scene when the human Other opens the space doors and tosses the alien into space, killing the nonhuman. I propose that this scene illustrates speciesist discrimination, and the inability to converge interests with another species. Based on the two underlying concepts, the human achieves victory and power.

I argue that the human acts as a speciesist within these three scenes by discriminating against a nonhuman species. The binary opposition between humans and nonhumans is evident in the film, and is rooted in discriminatory actions (Edwards 104). I point out that the human Other establishes this opposition in the final scene when she says, “I say *we* take off and nuke the entire site from orbit; it’s the only way to be sure [the aliens are destroyed]” This statement supports the speciesist undertone of many science fiction and horror films. *Aliens* conforms to the conventional trend of science fiction and horror film endings of human triumph and nonhuman defeat. Science fiction and horror films often destroy the monster [horror] or the outer space being [science fiction] (Belton 279) leaving the human victorious. This appears in *Fatal Attraction* as well when the human kills the psychopath. In relating this to *Fatal Attraction*, I show

how this demonstrates a speciesist attitude toward the nonhuman psychopath. The human destroys the monster [psychopath] at the end of the film. When the human shoots the psychopath, she survives and triumphs over the monster. Destroying the nonhuman gives power to the human. These discriminatory acts of violence reestablish patriarchy and allow the human to dominate over the nonhuman.

In order for the speciesist plot to take place successfully [human female versus nonhuman female], I postulate that patriarchy must remain firmly intact. Ripley upholds patriarchy when she protects the nuclear family [Newt, Corporal Hicks] from the alien queen. When Ripley destroys the queen, she helps to reestablish patriarchal power. Beth accomplishes the same thing by destroying the woman who threatened her familial unit. As such, female empowerment is a mask by which patriarchy controls female protagonists. Thus, like *Fatal Attraction*, *Aliens* does not offer an empowering character for women. Instead, the films offer powerful human female characters that fight for humanity and maintain a peaceful, patriarchal society. I conclude that while the protagonist in *Aliens* is pitted against the antagonist and allowed more access to power as a human, she is ultimately not empowering for women because her actions serve to reinstate the patriarchal structure.

#### IV. REPLICATING WOMEN AS ANTI-FEMINIST MACHINES: CYBORG FEMINISM (NOT) IN *THE STEPFORD WIVES*

*The Stepford Wives* (1975) presents a young, middle-class woman named Joanna Eberhart who moves with her family to Stepford, Connecticut. Although Joanna is a housewife, she enjoys photography as a hobby and seeks to turn it into a career. Upon arriving in the new neighborhood, she befriends the strange but friendly Stepford housewives. Her husband, Walter, joins the men's group to meet other Stepford husbands. When Joanna realizes there is no women's equivalent, she forms a women's group with the help of her friend Bobbie (who has not yet been replaced with a robotic duplicate). After a series of suspicious events, Joanna realizes the men's group is transforming women into robotic housewives. Joanna refuses to subjugate herself, so the men decide to destroy her as well.

*The Stepford Wives* provides an example of power dynamics among females of two species. The human female *appears* to have power over the nonhuman female. However, as the story unfolds, the nonhuman female gains more power. This film is unlike *Aliens* and *Fatal Attraction*, because the power dynamics affecting the antagonist are not revealed until the final scene. On the other hand, *The Stepford Wives* is like *Aliens* and *Fatal Attraction*, because it pits protagonist against antagonist in a way that reinforces the patriarchal structure. The protagonist reluctantly gives in to patriarchy whereas the antagonist willfully accepts her place in the domestic home. Though both are

subjugated, Joanna *appears* to be victorious because she represents “less of an Other.” My analysis incorporates these two concepts to expand on Beauvoir’s application of the Other and Scholz’s definition of empowerment that claims women are empowering when they dismantle the patriarchal system. Based upon Scholz’s definition of empowerment, I argue that the female protagonist fails to break free from patriarchal bonds and fails to disrupt the hierarchy of patriarchal power.

Scholars debate whether Joanna presents an empowering role for womankind. While I agree with scholars who argue against Joanna’s empowerment, other scholars claim the female protagonist illustrates women’s empowerment through independence. According to Herbert Gans, *The Stepford Wives* is the first film that deals with women’s liberation in the Second Wave Movement (qtd. in Gremler 2) by creating a space for women’s empowerment (Boruzkowski, Elliot, Helford, Silver, Gallardo and Smith). When Joanna forms a consciousness raising group to discuss women’s issues and positions within society, she draws directly from the women’s movement. This group is meant to discuss women’s roles in the household and the desire for other paths in life, including a career. Consciousness raising groups allowed women to congregate together and speak about similar issues affecting their personal lives. According to Gallardo and Smith, forming a consciousness raising group makes Joanna the perfect female protagonist (17). Unlike Gallardo and Smith, I argue that this “perfection” is based only in appearance, not reality. Although Joanna is portrayed as an activist for women’s rights, her activism is ultimately unsuccessful, and she remains stuck in the traditional role of housewife. By way of contrast, the men’s group is portrayed as possessing a patriarchal power, which remains intact at the end of the film, despite Joanna’s feminist activism.



Jane Elliott states Joanna displays independent qualities through her photography and desire for a career whereas “the Stepford wives stay home cleaning” (52). While Elliot associates Joanna’s independence with photography, I emphasize that Joanna’s photography never progresses beyond a hobby, unpaid work. In fact, the dichotomy between paid labor and unpaid labor creates tension in the family when Joanna’s hobby seems to be upsetting the traditional prioritization of the husband’s paid work outside the home. Indeed, Walter is angry when forced to baby-sit the children on the weekends while Joanna works in the dark room preparing photos. Rather than admire his wife’s ambition and independence, Walter is stymied. Beauvoir claims, “[Man] is so convinced of his rights that his wife’s least show of autonomy seems a rebellion to him” (500). Beauvoir’s idea of man is seen in *The Stepford Wives*. In this case, Walter feels threatened by Joanna’s independence. He attempts to hold onto the patriarchal family even as Joanna challenges his male authority.

Scholars claim that Joanna parallels the 1970’s women’s liberation movement that sought to fight against patriarchy’s restrictions. In *The Feminine Mystique* (an influential second wave text), Betty Friedan argues that women need to educate themselves about feminism, women’s liberation, and their role as housewives (Elliott 35). Many 1970s films depicted “suburban housewives driven batty by subordination, repression, drudgery, and neglect” (Faludi 137). Andi Zeisler states, “*Diary of a Mad Housewife* and 1975’s *The Stepford Wives*, both centered on the lives of female protagonists chafing at the patriarchy embodied by their husbands and communities” (68). One way that women sought to combat patriarchy is through consciousness raising groups. These groups encouraged women “to explore the details of their personal lives and through this

experience, to form political agendas” (Helford, “Rip-Off” 26). The consciousness group started by Joanna in *The Stepford Wives* is an attempt to liberate the Stepford wives from their domestic roles, but this attempt is not successful within a political context. For example, just to form the consciousness raising group, Joanna is forced to ask permission from each Stepford husband.

Lily Boruzkowski states, “To the liberated women, the monster is the patriarchy who will stop at nothing to maintain control” (n. pag.). Although I agree with scholars that Joanna *attempts* to challenge patriarchy by forming a women’s group, I question whether she actually *threatens* patriarchal power. Boruzkowski claims that men recognize the challenge posed by a women’s group; however, I claim that even with this potential challenge Joanna still does not break free from patriarchal bonds. Joanna’s women’s group lacks enthusiasm. The other Stepford women embrace their role as housewives and engage in rote conversations about cooking and cleaning. As a result, the women’s group quickly dissolves and cannot be used as a weapon to fight back. This surprises Joanna and Bobbie, and they begin to question the peculiar dronelike behavior exhibited by the other women, who “do not complain of not feeling alive, feeling incomplete, lacking personality or a sense of the self” (Paasonen 192). I agree with Paasonen’s claim that the wives’ refuse to question their inferior status within the patriarchal system represented by their husbands.

Since the Stepford men influence their wives’ views, the Stepford housewives dismiss the significance of a consciousness raising group. The attitude of the Stepford husbands mirrors a common male attitude toward women’s consciousness raising groups during the second wave. During this time period, many men did not take women’s issues,

such as female empowerment and liberation, seriously (Friedan xvi). Men ridiculed women who attempted to achieve liberation and break free from patriarchal power. According to Elyce Helford, the media “satirized feminism, rendered women’s efforts to attain equality and justice as both comedy and horror” (“Rip-Off” 25). This is clearly seen in *The Stepford Wives*. I acknowledge Friedan’s and Helford’s statements and argue that because of this, the film does not display a serious representation of women’s empowerment (in which they disrupt the hierarchy of patriarchal power). The rapid dissolution of Joanna’s group after the first meeting symbolizes men’s success in destroying the consciousness raising group.

In addition to the dissolution of the consciousness raising group, women’s empowerment is also undermined through the emphasis on consumerism in the film. According to Dow, the Stepford wives “are obsessed with finding the most effective household products” for their home (117) and fill their days with domestic chores. Since the women are housewives, they rely on their husbands for money. One of the ways that the women serve their husbands is by cleaning. The women are “busy with their duties” and lack free time to pursue their own desires (Czarniawska and Gustavsson 672). The housewives serve their husbands by focusing exclusively on the maintenance of a clean and efficient household. Instead of desiring a career and becoming financially independent, the Stepford women are content in their domestic role.

Joanna represents the housewife who does not want to remain economically dependent on a man. However, she lacks a paid job [freelance photographer] outside the home and must rely on and serve her husband. I argue that this reliance upon and service of her husband undercuts her potential to be empowering for women. Throughout the

film the audience sees Joanna struggling to do what she loves while submitting to familial obligations. Societal norms do not dissuade Joanna from pursuing her goals, but she has difficulty getting paid for her photography. When she finally receives payment for a few of her photographs, the museum only accepts photographs of family and children (Czarniawska and Gustavsson 670). The acceptance of these particular photographs reinforces the idealization of the nuclear family. The museum casts motherhood as the only acceptable subject for women photographers. Joanna's plight demonstrates the "difficulties of combining career ambition and motherhood" (Dow 129). I suggest that the film reinforces the patriarchal view of gender. Within patriarchy, woman's appropriate and natural place is in the home, with her family. The subjugation of wives and mothers is fundamental to the maintenance of patriarchy. Therefore, even as a photographer, Joanna cannot break free from patriarchal bonds because she is reminded of her proper place within the home.

Joanna's photographs also indicate male desire, a common Hollywood appeal. The male gaze, or scopophilia, "arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (Mulvey 18). I claim that although mothers are not typically eroticized, they are explicitly linked with sexuality due to the reproductive nature of their position. So, just like the photos, the Stepford housewives not only reinstate patriarchal norms and values, but also offer sexual excitement for their husbands. I believe that fetishizing the women as mothers in the nuclear family represents the sexualization and oppression of women. The perfect Stepford housewives appear as "physically beautiful, passive, fetishized objects of the male gaze" (Helford, "Stepford Wives" 148). It is their explicit connection to reproductive womanhood that leads to

sexual objectification.

The male gaze reestablishes patriarchal domination over women by subjugating them to passive roles and objectifying them into sexual objects. Helford cites a scene from the meeting of the Stepford men's group as an example of the male gaze. She notes that when Joanna heads into the kitchen, a man named Dale gazes at her as though she were "a passive object for male pleasure" ("Stepford Wives" 150). Dale states, "I like to watch women doing a little domestic chore." In this scene, Dale, who is head of the men's group, objectifies and subjugates Joanna to fulfill his sexual appetite and patriarchal interest. Dale's sexual objectification of Joanna is only one example within the film. Helford points out another situation where Joanna is speaking with Walter in the living room and conveying her feelings of disappointment regarding the people of Stepford and her anger at Walter for joining the men's group without consulting her first. As she is speaking, Walter suddenly interjects, "have you ever made it [had sex] in front of a fireplace?" (Helford, "Rip-Off" 31). Here, I believe that Walter subjugates his wife by imposing his self-interest before her needs, establishing her as an object to fulfill his sexual pleasure.

I argue that man's sexual appetite appears as a reoccurring theme in many scenes. The construction of the housewife is that of a passive object. Unfortunately for Walter, Joanna's character is not very passive. By sexually objectifying Joanna, Walter is putting her in her place. When Joanna refuses to be kowtowed into passivity, Walter secures the fulfillment of his sexual needs by murdering her and creating a new sexualized robotic woman. He re-creates her based on beauty rather than intellect (Short 98). I suggest the modification of woman as a sexualized object demonstrates the submission of woman to

the male gaze.

While many scholars argue that Joanna challenges patriarchy through the formation of a women's group and her work as a freelance photographer, I agree with other scholars who argue against Joanna's empowerment and claim that Joanna still occupies a subordinate position in society. When confronted with challenges, the female protagonist appears inadequate and unable to achieve her goals. Though Joanna achieves empowerment to a certain point she ultimately falls victim to the men's group. At first, the film highlights Joanna's rejection of domestic life and begins to portray the female protagonist as a liberated woman. However, by the end of the film, the female protagonist falls prey to the men's group when they use her children as bait to draw Joanna into their secret mansion. Barbara Czarniawska and Eva Gustavsson criticize the female protagonist claiming, "[Joanna] changes from a resourceful woman to a moron" (669). I agree with Czarniawska and Gustavsson that Joanna gets caught in the men's trap because of a lack of preparation in her rescue mission. The concern for her children influences Joanna's downfall. When she rushes in into the mansion to save her children, she finds herself face-to-face with her identical robotic clone who kills the human Joanna. Ultimately, she fails in her goal to escape the men's group and rescue the children.

When Joanna is murdered and recreated at the end of the film, her new replacement symbolizes a transformation back to the 1950s stereotypical female. When Joanna dies so does women's empowerment. The 1950's was the last decade preceding second wave feminism when women held passive roles in the patriarchal family. The passive role of the Stepford housewives depicts a "playboy playmate that will stay home and bake cakes and audibly enjoy sex" (Short 89). The robotic housewives willingly

submit to stereotypical roles to fulfill male desire and service patriarchy. Through the creation process, the men program their robotic wives' sexuality [including reproduction] and behavior (Silver 69). In other words, the women are programmed to embody stereotypical gender roles and must act "within specific codes of acceptable behavior" (Short 83). Therefore, unlike housewives, female empowering characters challenge traditional gender roles.

Unlike the robotic housewife, Joanna did not exhibit acceptable behaviors in the home. She threatened masculine power and control. Helford states, "The Stepford men clearly find their wives a threat or they would not need to murder and replace them with automatons" ("Stepford Wives" 148). I agree with Helford that with the invention of these robots the Stepford men assuage their fears and no longer feel threatened by women, as they create their own vision of 'woman.' In this way, the men fortify the patriarchal structure against the threat of feminism. This plot reflects Faludi's discussion of the backlash against feminism, in which the Second Wave Movement is blamed by popular culture for women's unhappiness (14). Joanna's unhappiness as a housewife leads to her death in the film. If she had been content with her role as housewife and had not fallen prey to feminism's promises of equality and independence, she could have avoided her death. Joanna represents feminism, and, thus, her murder and subsequent replacement by a clone reveal the societal desire to undo the gains of feminism and return to traditional gender roles. The replacement of the Stepford wives with clones created by their husbands represents the re-establishment of the patriarchal order prior to the second wave.

I argue that Joanna fails to disrupt the gender hierarchy of power since the Stepford men succeed in their plan to murder her and create a robotic clone. *The Stepford Wives* suggests that, so long as patriarchy remains intact, the only option for women is to give in and accept the passive traditional gender role as domestic housewife. If she refuses to submit, then she is transformed into a new being. The audience experiences the full horror of this realization along with Joanna as she comes face-to-face with her own clone in the film's climax. When she meets her clone face-to-face, she comes to the horrifying realization that she has lost to patriarchy. The clone kills Joanna using pantyhose, which represents the "constricting norms of female beauty that Joanna tried to reject" (Silver 72). Although I agree with Silver's analysis, I add that Joanna ultimately fails to dismantle the hierarchy of male power. According to Helford, the film offers a misogynistic outlook on Joanna's death and "(metaphorically, the death of second-wave feminism as presented in the film)" ("Stepford Wives" 151). Within my argument, Joanna's death also represents the failure of Joanna's empowering potential. Her death and subsequent replacement by a clone insures that the patriarchal system will remain intact in Stepford and also serves as a warning to all those who might seek to challenge patriarchy.

My interpretation of the film suggests that Joanna lacks determination and willpower to fight patriarchy. Although even Dale admits that, when compared to the human Stepford wives, Joanna was "brighter than most," her intelligence was not enough to successfully challenge male domination and patriarchal authority (George 114). I agree with the scholars who reiterate that the minimal power given to the female protagonist is stripped away from Joanna by the end of the film (Gremmler, Boruzkowski, Czarniawska



and Gustavsson). I propose that since the female protagonist cannot triumph over patriarchy, without societal power, Joanna fails to dismantle the patriarchal system. Within the film, the misogynistic ideology of the Stepford husbands is privileged over the feminist potential embodied in Joanna. Therefore, I claim that Joanna does not offer an empowering image for women. Although Joanna's death, as the death of the human female, distinguishes *The Stepford Wives* from *Fatal Attraction* and *Aliens*, the three films are connected through the reinstatement of the patriarchal family and the frustrated feminist potential of the female protagonist.

I argue that, just as in *Fatal Attraction* and *Aliens*, the female protagonist in *The Stepford Wives* is only granted provisional access to individual power so long as she appears to be fighting for humankind. To further illustrate this idea, I apply the concepts of the Other and cyborg feminism to the film. Cyborg feminism is a contemporary theory that emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Donna Haraway pioneered this concept in her article, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." According to Haraway, cyborg feminism is a theoretical concept that looks at the potential for women's empowerment through advanced technology. Haraway suggests, "We are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system" (122). Haraway is describing a transformation from the Age of Industrialization to a new society in the Information Age. In the Information Age, says Haraway, cyborg feminism is a subtext under the larger umbrella of cyborg technology. Haraway contends the Information Age reconceptualizes feminist roles in its bid to empower women through cyborg technology. Shira Chess explains Haraway's definition of cyborgs: "we [humans] are all cyborgs: glasses, braces, prosthetics,

vaccinations, and plastic surgery are all ways that we combine ourselves with technology” (88). In this way, technology becomes “a tool of empowerment to liquidate gender, race and class differences” (Chess 88). In its attempt to remove these differences, technology then blends the boundaries between cyborgs and humans.

I argue that *The Stepford Wives* reinforces the boundaries between cyborgs and humans. The film contradicts Haraway’s notion of cyborg feminism by presenting an oppositional viewpoint to show that there is no potential for women’s empowerment through technology. In other words, I apply a negative view of cyborg feminism to the film. In my analysis, cyborgs are used to reinstate traditional gender roles in the film. This use of cyborg technology is not empowering for women. While Haraway’s cyborg represents a feminist purpose, the cyborg in *The Stepford Wives* represents a patriarchal purpose. The Stepford patriarchy controls technology and exploits cyborgs. I would define a cyborg in the context of the film by a 3-D mechanical body with artificial intelligence. In this case, the film only presents one type of cyborg; a hybrid of human and machine, a cross between the impersonal robot and the personally compassionate human being. Essentially, the film presents the cyborg as a combination of organic and inorganic whereas the human is fully organic. The former is a product of mechanical and repairable parts, while the latter is organic and non-repairable.

For this reason, I suggest that the boundaries between humans and cyborgs are not blurred, but rather separated based on physical and reproductive change in *The Stepford Wives*. What separates a human woman from her cyborg equivalent is the ability to control her reproduction. Human female reproduction consists of a biological and natural process whereas the 3-D mechanical female cyborg consists of genetic cloning. In the

Information Age, robotic simulations of the reproductive process involve genetic cloning. Unlike biological reproduction, replication is the duplication or cloning of a species and often refers to genetic engineering associated with advanced technology. Human women are outdated in the Information Age, and replaced by a more perfect ideal of reproduction—a controlled and refined stem cell pool controlled by the Stepford patriarchy. In the film, the artificial female cyborg plays an anti-feminist being controlled by Stepford men. In other words, the film does not present the potential that technology can empower women. Instead, the plot demonstrates that patriarchal society controls technology in the Information Age.

With this negative view on cyborg feminism, I explain how the film addresses reproductive rights, sexuality, and man's control over the female body. This can be applied to the female *cyborg body* and human female *body* in *The Stepford Wives* in order to emphasize the presence of a boundary line between humans and cyborgs. The film widens the boundaries between cyborg rights and through the representation of human reproductive rights. Awareness of one's rights and one's freedom of choices distinguishes the human female from the female cyborg in the film. In this way, human females have control over their body whereas the 3-D mechanical female cyborg *body* is controlled by men. Men create the female cyborg body to control her reproductive rights and sexuality. Men control technology in the Information Age. *The Stepford Wives* is an example of how boundary lines are separated and reinforced between humans and technology.

I chose three scenes from *The Stepford Wives* to depict the conflict between Joanna and cyborg Stepford wives. In these scenes Joanna represents the human, female

Other, while the cyborg represents the mechanical, nonhuman, female Other. The first film scene introduces the female protagonist and her relationship to the female antagonist through the town's cyborg wives. The second scene illustrates a direct conflict between the female protagonist and the antagonist. Finally, the third scene concludes the cyborg and human dilemma and reinstates the patriarchal nuclear family.

In the first scene, Joanna invites a group of six Stepford women to her home for a consciousness raising meeting, and unknowingly mixes humans and nonhumans. The humans—Joanna, Bobbie, Charmaine—do not understand the odd behavior of the other wives. This scene highlights the relationship between the female protagonist [human] and the female antagonist [cyborg]. The female protagonist leads the discussion without realizing four of the women are artificial. Anne Balsamo distinguishes the body of a machine from the human body by stating, “machines are rational, artificial and durable; humans are emotional, organic and mortal” (149). The female cyborgs contain a mechanical and human interface forming a new artificial body capable of producing human emotion. Since cyborgs can seemingly experience emotion, they can pass as humans. I suggest the combination between physical appearance and ability to parrot emotion allows the four cyborg wives to superficially pass as humans. However, the three human wives are suspicious when the cyborgs begin obsessing over household tasks because the point of the meeting is not to serve one's husband. Joanna tells the group about her marriage and her relationship to Walter. But the four cyborg wives dismiss Joanna's story and continue their conversation on servicing their husbands. In this instance, the cyborg wives appear to lack an understanding of the meeting's purpose and

cannot adapt to a topic they are not programmed to understand. Their intelligence is limited.

I reverse the concept of cyborg feminism by applying a negative view of the theory, and examining the intelligence gap that separates humans from cyborgs. Their mechanical programming limits their intelligence, restricting the cyborg wives' range of human knowledge. In other words, cyborgs fail to focus on "what it means to be 'human'" (Gallardo and Smith 14) because they are half nonhuman. I claim that cyborg wives fail to grasp deep meaningful aspects of being (half) human even though they appear to lead a full human life. Unlike the cyborg wives, the human wives grasp deeper meanings and expand their intellect. The purpose of the consciousness raising group was to discuss issues affecting their personal lives. Humans grow and learn from personal experiences whereas cyborgs remain stagnant. Science fiction and horror films illustrate this type of conflict between human females and female cyborgs. Often cyborgs must unfairly compete with humans who continue to grow and learn. As such, cyborgs struggle to fit within human society. I suggest that they symbolize the 'outsider,' an unfamiliar species, both of which are associated with the Other. Since cyborgs are the Other, they automatically stand against humanity. Unlike *Fatal Attraction* and *Aliens*, the nonhuman female [cyborg] in *The Stepford Wives* is aligned with male patriarchy. In this scene, the cyborg wife is the nonhuman Other while the human wife is the human Other. The female cyborg is 'more of an Other' than the human female. Although both the protagonist and antagonist are female Others based on sex, I argue the antagonist is also an Other based on species. The first indication of species Otherness is exemplified by the lack of intelligence exhibited by the cyborg wives.

The nonhuman Other is exploited by human society, and, in *The Stepford Wives*, the female cyborg is both a servant and a sexual slave who exists to serve men. As a “mere object” the cyborg housewife is used as an “exploitable resource” by human men (Lykke 82). The cyborg wife remains subservient to her husband whereas the human defends herself against man’s exploitation. Unlike the cyborg, the human controls how she thinks and acts. The human Other attempts to embrace her identity as an individual whereas the nonhuman Other relies on her programmed identity. In this role, the nonhuman Other has a *group* identity rather than an *individual* identity. I state that each cyborg wife thinks and acts similar to others, and seem to find happiness and fulfillment through cleaning and cooking. Thus, the cyborgs, seem as a group, to be “happy little Disney world wives” (Schelde 224). This is why the cyborgs are confused by their counterparts and respond by ignoring the desires of the humans during the consciousness raising group.

I suggest the distinctions between cyborg and human wives are clear during the consciousness raising meeting and rooted in the mechanical [re]production of the cyborgs. After cloning the cyborgs, the men program them to kill their human equivalent. The cyborgs murder their identical human Other, and represent “former humans who have been physically modified in some way” (Short 5). I explain that the mission is to control female reproduction by killing off the human women and replacing them with cyborgs. This is one reason why I suggest that the film depicts a pessimistic view of cyborg feminism. Technology is not only controlled by men, but it is used to oppress (human) women rather than empower them. The Stepford men attempt to create a “controlled evolution” (Telotte 47), or controlled environment, in which they govern the

human population through female reproduction. When “real” women act as feminists, patriarchy replaces them with controllable “women” or cyborgs who represent ‘more of an Other.’ A woman’s freedom is completely co-opted by patriarchy, which eliminates female equality. To remove or limit female equality further limits a woman’s role in the Information Age. It is my belief that when men control reproduction, they not only control human life but also the ideal feminine. This is representative of the backlash to feminism. This backlash creates the foundation of *The Stepford Wives* and is present in each scene analyzed.

The second scene follows Joanna when she finds out her children are missing and visits Bobbie to learn where they are. Joanna realizes Bobbie is no longer human and stabs her in the stomach. I propose that one distinction between the human body and the cyborg body is the presence of blood. Often science fiction and horror films mark blood as an indicator of human life. In this scene, when the human Other gently pokes her finger, she bleeds. However, when Joanna stabs cyborg Bobbie in the abdomen there is no blood. I emphasize that the abdomen is suggestive of the womb area. In this instance, cyborg Bobbie is established as a nonhuman Other, a replicated being who is not a real woman but “looks like the perfect woman, cleans and has sex like the perfect woman” (Silver 70). Since Bobbie is a cyborg, she is unable to reproduce like a human and is instead a “sterile, unnatural nonwoman” (Silver 70). This is symbolically represented by Joanna stabbing Bobbie in the abdomen, or, womb. Although Bobbie does not bleed, the wound causes mechanical damage, and Bobbie malfunctions. When destroying the womb area, Bobbie’s nonwoman status is solidified. I explain that cyborg Bobbie is indeed an unnatural woman who lacks blood and remains sterile. She is a mechanical replication

whereas Joanna represents biological reproduction, which is a natural process of human beings.

At this point, I believe Joanna is significant because she is the last remaining human housewife. When replicated cyborgs wipe out human females, it stops the flow of human life and biological reproduction. The audience “roots” for the survival of one last human female. The survival of the human female is dependent on access to power and how well she utilizes that power. In this scene, I apply my concept of the revised hierarchy of power dynamics, which grants access to power based on a being’s species type, biological sex, and service to patriarchy. Until this point, I suggest the human Other has fulfilled the duties of housewife in support of the patriarchal nuclear family even though she is beginning to challenge patriarchal interest. This scene depicts the protagonist’s use of individual power within the revised hierarchy of power dynamics.

Within this scene, I propose that the nonhuman Other is ‘more of an Other’ by representing a defective machine gone out-of-control, and because she represents mechanical reproduction whereas the human represents functional and biological reproduction. The cyborg’s Otherness poses great danger to the human by revealing capabilities that are uncontrollable and unpredictable. When the human Other observes the defective cyborg, she suddenly realizes the uncontrollable capabilities these cyborgs possess. The human Other, sensing trouble, retreats. Joanna does not realize that the cyborg only poses danger to her human identical. Cyborg housewives only murder their counterparts, but they still represent ‘more of an Other.’ As a result, cyborg Bobbie remains defenseless against Joanna. Because of how the cyborg is programmed (lacking choice), the human Other holds power over the nonhuman.



This scene illustrates the power dynamics between the human and the cyborg in which the human holds greater power over her mind and body. The body correlates to reproduction whereas the mind corresponds to intelligence [cognition and recognition]. The human and nonhuman Other are distinguishable because they each have different levels of intellect and free-will. When the human Other confronts cyborg Bobbie and asks her to recall the word 'archaic,' she reminds Bobbie that on a separate occasion they visited a housewife who could not recognize this word after a sudden transformation. Bobbie no longer recognizes the word, and also has no memory of the visit. As a result, Joanna is suspicious that Bobbie is no longer human. She recognizes the significance of this word recalling how it relates to human beings as 'out-of-date' in the Information Age. Specifically "archaic" references outdated humans with outdated beliefs, or what 'once was' before the transformation from human to cyborg. Also, the word "was originally used [by the human other] to describe the [sexist] exclusive Men's Association" (Boruzkowski n. pag.). In failing to remember "archaic," cyborg Bobbie displays a different level of cognition. While the human Other recalls the word and its significance, the nonhuman lacks memory of the word's meaning. The cyborg's mind is limited to certain vocabulary and memory, which "limits knowledge, understanding, self-expression, and creativity" (Boruzkowski n. pag.). The Stepford men who program the cyborgs prefer unintelligent wives.

In order to create perfect wives, the Stepford men draw on their own working knowledge of manufacturing and computer engineering. Each Stepford man is employed at one of the following companies known as "CompuTech," "Data Systems Inc.," and "COBA Biochemical Associates" (Johnston and Sears 78). These companies assist with

the process of genetic engineering or replication. The men utilize the technology of each company to replicate a new female species for exploitation, thus creating “the technoscientific epitome of male empowerment and self fulfillment” (Johnston and Sears 89). Here the film demonstrates that this type of cyborg technology is controlled by men who use the *cyborg body* for their own patriarchal purpose. Because men control technology, women cannot succeed in achieving female empowerment through technology. The transformation of the human female to the female cyborg alters the individual “both physically and psychologically” (Boruzkowski n. pag.). The process exploits the female mind as well as the body. As a result, the cyborgs lack power and autonomy. The men tweak the female mind and body parts creating a species that responds to patriarchal needs [control] and male desire [sexual pleasure]. Men replicate a lesser intelligent being to avoid confrontation by a female who may challenge his power and authority.

Replication threatens the human female body by creating a perfectly programmed replacement body. The creation of female cyborgs threatens the lives of human females. When Joanna walks inside the unlocked room at the mansion, she finds her clone smiling at her. She is dumbfounded by the likeness, and by two striking differences. Cyborg Joanna has larger breasts and dark black eyes that mark her species as nonhuman. The breasts are a sexual characteristic, and the eyes mark her as nonhuman. Specifically, the eyes lack pupils and are solid black suggesting “monster’s eyes [that] are not true and pure human eyes” (Lykke 76). The Stepford men cannot perfectly replicate the eyes as they can the voice, body, and desired level of intelligence of the cyborgs.

At this point in the film, Joanna is 'less of an Other' when compared to the cyborg because this scene emphasizes the cyborg's lack of the reproductive capacity (which defines women). This advocates an ideal of essentialism, which reduces women to their reproductive functions. In summary, the female cyborg is programmed as an unintelligent, beautiful, and subservient species that murders the human female who confronts and challenges male authority. Even so, Joanna supports patriarchy because she upholds and protects the nuclear family. This helps explain why the outcome of the film is undetermined at this point in the film.

The final scene I analyze involves the first direct confrontation between Joanna and her cyborg clone. The climax represents the deadly conflict between the human and the nonhuman fighting for survival and victory. The clone strangles Joanna to death. In this scene, the human female is directly affected by the impact of the Stepford technology when she is faced with her cyborg clone. Balsamo mentions, "[Cyborgs] fascinate us because they are not like us, and yet just like us" (155). The cyborg clone resembles a similar appearance to the human in size, shape, and looks even though both species are fundamentally different in terms of physical and reproductive change. I explain that the cyborg body is the outcome of advanced technology [replication] in the Information Age whereas the human body is seen as "archaic" coming from the Industrial Age [biological reproduction]. In relating this back to an earlier idea, I claim that reproduction reinforces what *defines* the human female and what *separates* her from her cyborg counterpart. Mechanical reproduction, or replication, defines the female cyborg body and separates her from the human female. When applying a pessimistic analysis of cyborg feminism to the film, technology [replication] negatively affects human women because a

manufactured body can be created to replace a human, biological body. In the film, technology [replication] oppresses human women. Haraway's cyborg feminism optimistically envisions an emancipatory potential for technology. But, *The Stepford Wives* depicts a potentially negative outcome. In the world of the film technology is controlled by men who use it for their own patriarchal purpose. Unlike *Fatal Attraction*, and *Aliens*, the revised hierarchy ultimately grants power to the *nonhuman* Other who better serves patriarchy.

*The Stepford Wives* is unique among science fiction and horror films, which typically depict the human victorious over the nonhuman. Even though the audience "roots" for Joanna, they watch as she is strangled by her "evil" clone. I argue that in this final scene, the cyborg sides with patriarchy. Here Joanna is the patriarchal threat who challenges traditional male values and male desire, whereas the cyborg lacks the ability to oppose patriarchy. Despite being stabbed cyborg Bobbie survives at the end of the film because she supports patriarchal ideals. Traditionally, the human female acquires greater access to power than the nonhuman female in the revised hierarchy of power dynamics. The nonhuman female acquires more power by providing a greater service to patriarchy. In a revised hierarchy, power is granted to an Other on patriarchal needs and interests. Cyborg Bobbie serves patriarchy by surrendering and sustaining the female role in the patriarchal family. Unlike cyborg Bobbie, human Joanna questions the defined female role. Human Joanna challenges this role when she observes the cyborg housewives catering full-time to their husbands. Thus, the nonhuman female is granted more power by patriarchy. This tips the scale in favor of the nonhuman, and she is allowed to murder her human counterpart in the ultimate backlash against feminism.

Human Joanna remains defenseless. I believe the human's demise symbolizes the complete control over female reproduction by patriarchy. The film contradicts cyborg feminism's contention that cyborg technology empowers women. It shows how it can actually be detrimental to the human female population. If replication thrives, then the biological reproductive system ceases to exist. It is how technology is used, and not the technology itself, that serves patriarchy. *The Stepford Wives* showcases the danger of continued patriarchal control in the Information Age. Although humans are generally preferred over their nonhuman counterparts, I suggest the ability to completely control nonhumans makes them a preferred object of masculine desire. The result is the perfect union between nonhuman females and human males who work together to create a new society that excludes the human female. While the human female remains loyal to humanity, patriarchy, loyal only to itself, strives to construct a new humanity. The human female values all human life whereas patriarchy values technology. The Stepford men are the real culprits who undermine advances in feminism. They seek to destroy their human wives and control all aspects of reproduction in a technologically advanced society.

Within *The Stepford Wives*, patriarchal power remains intact, and the human female is relegated to a continual state of Otherness and oppression. In my view, the finale marks the failure of the human female, who tries to prevent patriarchy from gaining *total* power. Although human Joanna tries to defeat the system on her own, she fails. Joanna's death symbolizes her failure to dismantle the power relations of the gender hierarchy, and her failure allows patriarchy to continue to create the cyborg. The potential of cyborg feminism is fatally thwarted when the cyborg is used to serve patriarchal interests; as Joanna dies, so also does the hope of cyborg technology for women.

*The Stepford Wives* depicts the nonhuman cyborg as an ideal female even though she relies on mechanical replication rather than biological reproduction. At first, the film represents her as a human female, but her true identity as a nonhuman female is later revealed. As the cyborg's true identity is exposed, so is her true demeanor. When unveiled, the cyborg female becomes the malicious killer who is also the "ideal" female. This deadly combination is controlled by patriarchy. Although Joanna is viewed as a "real" woman because of her species status, she is not controllable. Therefore, the feminist woman represents a greater threat to the patriarchy than does the cyborg female. As a result, the cyborg wins against the human woman because the human woman, as the feminist, is the real monster who must be destroyed in the Information Age. If this film captured an optimistic view of Haraway's cyborg feminism, then technology would not be controlled by men, and Joanna would survive. Technology would present the potential for female empowerment. Instead, human Joanna ends up being a threat to patriarchal society because she has control over her own reproduction. I argue that the protagonist becomes a martyr defending humanity while at the same time representing a weak female. Although the nonhuman woman's victory over the human woman seems to set *The Stepford Wives* apart from *Fatal Attraction* and *Aliens*, in all three films it is 'less of an Other' who is granted limited, provisional power in order to protect patriarchal interests. The cyborg woman's conformity to traditional gender roles and her alignment with patriarchy make her 'less of an Other' in *The Stepford Wives*. With the death of Joanna at the hands of her cyborg clone, patriarchy is once again reinstated, and Hollywood fails once again to provide us with an empowering female protagonist.

## V. CONCLUSION

The three films I have selected—*Fatal Attraction*, *Aliens*, and *The Stepford Wives*— demonstrate the controversy surrounding the representation of women’s empowerment in science fiction and horror films. All three films were made between the 1970s and 1980s, when Hollywood began to reflect women’s changing roles in society. Before the 1960s, women commonly played the wife/mother role that catered to patriarchal ideals of the nuclear family. The traditional concept of this role placed women in inferior and passive positions. The second wave of feminism ushered in a new female role—that of the single, career woman who had acquired at least some measure of both financial and sexual independence. This new woman was a leader, a warrior, a fighter, or a scientist, and many audiences viewed these female characters as empowering. Science fiction and horror genres embraced women’s perceived empowerment with films like *Terminator 2*, *Star Trek*, *The Andromeda Strain*, *Halloween*, *Friday the Thirteenth*, *Futureworld*, *Dressed to Kill*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. With these new roles, women’s “empowerment” was related to their masculine qualities. Specifically, women incorporated masculine traits by using physical strength, weapons, verbal aggression, and reproductive control to fight “the bad guy.” However, despite these characters’ obvious strength and rejection of traditional femininity, scholars continue to debate whether these female action heroes are truly empowering for women.

I selected *Fatal Attraction*, *Aliens*, and *The Stepford Wives* to meet four criteria for analysis: the presence of a female protagonist and antagonist; the inclusion of a

physical interaction between both female characters; the existence of significant controversy surrounding the plot's emphasis on women's empowerment; and the presence of themes common in the science fiction and horror film genres. Based upon my analysis of the three films, I argue that the female protagonists in *Fatal Attraction*, *Aliens*, and *The Stepford Wives* fail to empower women because their actions do not ultimately destabilize the patriarchal hierarchy. Although the female protagonists in *Fatal Attraction*, *Aliens*, and *The Stepford Wives* are allowed access to some power when they are pitted against non-human antagonists, these characters are ultimately not empowering for women because they function to reinforce, rather than undermine, the patriarchal structure. Using three well established theories, as well as my concept of the revised hierarchy of power dynamics, I demonstrate how each female protagonist is empowering through her species rather than her gender. In other words, she is a powerful *human* figure, perpetuating humanity in a patriarchal society, rather than representing women's empowerment. In a revised hierarchy of power dynamics, men grant power based on service to patriarchal desires. In *Fatal Attraction* and *Aliens*, the human female is granted the individual power to destroy the nonhuman. In contrast, the nonhuman of *The Stepford Wives* destroys the human female. In all cases, patriarchal needs are prioritized and fulfilled. In the hierarchy, the human and nonhuman female Others remain limited in their ability to obtain power compared to human men.

While the three female protagonists in each film fail to portray empowering characters for *womankind*, they *do* portray empowering characters for *humankind*. By extension, human identity holds more weight than gender identity. This suggests a greater significance for species identification. Utilizing a speciesist theoretical model helps one



to best understand the power dynamics illustrated between the protagonist and antagonist of each film. In *Fatal Attraction*, the human Other finds herself in a dangerous situation with the nonhuman psychopath. Ignorant of the human's power, the nonhuman attacks and dies. In *Aliens*, the human Other tosses the nonhuman into space in order to win a physically unfair battle. Finally, in *The Stepford Wives*, the human grows suspicious of the cyborg, and stabs the nonhuman. In each instance, humanity is central to the conflict.

Within each of the films, the human acquires more access to power to harm the nonhuman; this provisional power reflects the alignment of speciesism and patriarchy. The nonhuman represents a species Other, which is based on the concept of the gendered Other. The concept of the Other is applicable to species because it is rooted in a belief that one species, race, sex, etcetera is superior to all others. Using the concept of the Other, the human female and nonhuman female remain at the bottom of the hierarchy until one is granted individual power. When the Other achieves power, it moves further up the hierarchy. The Other only receives access to individual power by utilizing it to wound or destroy the enemy of patriarchy. Thus, even when the human Other is a powerful figure, she reinstates the values of patriarchy. These protagonists cannot be empowering for women unless they disrupt patriarchal power. When they threaten patriarchal power, patriarchy fights back and wins. The women each lose their power to the nuclear family and fail to dismantle the hierarchy of patriarchal power.

In order to be empowering for women, the female character must be shown accessing her power as a woman and using this power to undermine the oppressive foundation of the patriarchal structure. If a woman is able to recognize and access her power as a woman, then she can utilize this power to break away from the control of her

oppressors. The individual must recognize her power and use it against the oppressor(s) in order to empower women. These three films are significant for the discussion of female empowerment because 1) during these decades more lead female characters were emerging in science fiction and horror films (a predominantly male genre), 2) they represent the influence of second wave feminism, and 3) they address the relationship between the female character and patriarchy. In all three films, the female protagonist *appears* to be a strong character when she is perceived by the audiences to challenge patriarchy. For instance, I argue that in each film, the protagonist *appears* to verbally and/or physically attack men. My goal in analyzing these three films is to help scholars rethink and reevaluate the definition of female empowerment in science fiction and horror films. My contention that the three female protagonists are not empowering is based upon a definition of empowering, which focuses upon the relationship between female characters and women viewers.

Without question, an empowering female character would be present in each of these three films if the protagonist and antagonist joined alliances to fight patriarchal power. For example, Ripley might join the alien queen in a fight against the Weyland-Yutani Company by protecting the alien species and destroying the men who wish to conquer Planet LV-426. Joanna could re-program the cyborg wives to form an alliance with the human housewives and murder the Stepford men. This type of alternate ending allows for the successful triumph of the human and nonhuman female. If this were the case, then neither the protagonist nor the antagonist would face the consequence of death. When the human and nonhuman form alliances, they have a greater chance of successfully destroying patriarchal power and achieving female empowerment. An

empowering film ending would result in the dismantling of patriarchy and the success and survival of all females, regardless of species. Perhaps, it might even blur the clear-cut reality of good versus evil, and human/nonhuman versus patriarchy. Patriarchy would represent 'evil,' and the female Others would represent 'good.' In this way, the films would conclude with the idea that patriarchal power is malicious and must be destroyed.

Within these three films, the concept of the Other is connected to speciesism and cyborg feminism through the oppositional binaries embodied in the protagonist and antagonist. The selected films and theories integrate two specific binaries: a sex/gender binary and a species binary. The sex/gender binary includes Beauvoir's application of the Other where female/woman is in relation to male/man. I address the issue of the female Others using a species binary rather than solely relying upon a gender binary because most scholarship on film examines only the gender binary between men and women. The use of the species binary is particularly appropriate for my work because the conflict in each film manifests between the female protagonist and a female antagonist from a different species. The species binary separates the human from the nonhuman to define what is normal [human] and what is not [nonhuman]. Speciesism divides the species by defining one as human and another as nonhuman. The concept of the Other separates the two species into a human Other and a nonhuman Other. Finally, I apply a negative view of cyborg feminism to more clearly distinguish boundaries between the human Other and the nonhuman. I reframe the debate on women's empowerment to look at women's empowerment through a species binary rather than solely through the lens of gender. My work makes a unique contribution to the ongoing debate on women's empowerment through film because I use a revised hierarchy of power to reveal that, as a human, the

female protagonist is ‘less of an Other’ than the nonhuman female antagonist. Despite their ‘preferred Otherness,’ however, none of the female protagonists ultimately challenge patriarchy in such a way as to be empowering for women.

Few contemporary scholars offer insight into how female characters relate to one another, as gendered Others; scholarship typically focuses on masculine-feminine othering and cross-racial othering. This lack of scholarly research makes it essential to expand the concept of the Other. Speciesism and cyborg feminism provide useful lens to do so. However, in conducting research, I found there are few journal articles on speciesism, and very few scholars apply this concept to science fiction and horror films. Instead, most journal articles on speciesism apply to animal rights. Although scholars acknowledge the binary between human and nonhuman, they refer to animals rather than extraterrestrial aliens, cyborgs, etc. Scholars writing on cyborg feminism focus mostly on cyberfeminism, which addresses how cyberspace (computer technology) affects women in the Information Age.

My argument draws upon both cyborg feminism and speciesism in order to incorporate different dimensions of identity. By incorporating different dimensions of identity, it makes space for societal acceptance. Multiple interpretations allows for an intricate understanding of identity that makes space for societal acceptance of nonhuman species. The revised hierarchy of power dynamics acknowledges and accepts these multiple interpretations. Scholars must utilize a revised hierarchy of power dynamics to accommodate any nonhuman species Others. Often scholars, researchers and scientists fail to acknowledge the presence of these nonhuman species. To become aware would mean accepting the reality of these nonhumans. Without realizing it, humans act

speciesist toward nonhuman beings and expect nonhumans to appear animal-like, suggesting that all nonhumans are inferior and primitive. Thus, in many science fiction and horror films, humans portray the superior being over the nonhuman. To account for the nonhuman, it is significant that scholars expand on their analysis of the human/nonhuman binary within film.

I believe that scholars must consider the human/nonhuman binary when evaluating women's empowerment. To determine women's empowerment in film, one usually examines the *gender* binary between males and females. By applying the gender binary to a *species* binary, I propose that one can analyze criteria for female empowerment in both the human *and* nonhuman female species. This is a unique approach at changing the criteria for women's empowerment because many scholars analyze the empowerment of the human female and rarely study the empowerment of the nonhuman female. It is important to critique female empowerment based on both gender *and* species types. When examining female empowerment in film, I recommend that scholars take into consideration the human female's relationship to the nonhuman female, since both species represent the Other. One example of applying this criterion includes looking at the unequal distribution of power between the human and nonhuman. Not only is there unequal power between human males and human females, but there is also unequal power between human females and nonhuman females. Although the female/male dynamic is important for analyzing women's empowerment, critiquing the human female/nonhuman female conflict is essential as well. Perhaps the absence of scholarship critiquing the human female/nonhuman female conflict can be explained in part by the tendency for nonhuman Others to be classified as fictitious. Scholars tend to

use the Linnaean animal classification system, which excludes nonhumans such as cyborgs and aliens. Although these creatures are often present in science fiction and horror films, there continues to be a lack of scholarship on empowerment as it relates to the human *and* nonhuman female.

I further suggest that scholars ought to consider a negative application of cyborg feminism to the potential of technology to be detrimental to women's empowerment. When I apply this view to *The Stepford Wives*, I incorporate aspects of the female [Other] and the species type [human or nonhuman] to separate and reinforce the boundaries between the human and nonhuman. By applying a unique approach to cyborg feminism, it becomes an extension and application of the previously discussed theories (the concept of the Other and speciesism). Although *The Stepford Wives* is the only film examined here that focuses on the boundary between human and cyborg, it provides an excellent case study for the intersection of all three theories. With this in mind, *The Stepford Wives* is one example of many other science fiction and horror films that create a distinct relationship between cyborg technology [female cyborg creatures] and humans. I believe that cyborg technology is relevant for examination of the gender binary between men and women. Understanding male control over cyborg technology is significant to women's empowerment. As I point out in *The Stepford Wives*, the cyborg creature is used for patriarchal purposes. Women cannot achieve empowerment when men control technology. There is patriarchal control of cyborg technology. This results in a male dominated Information Age.

In a male-dominated Information Age, multiple applications of cyborg technology will be controlled by men, including: medicine, prosthetic surgery, and cloning. Medicine

has aided in cybernetics while assisting humans in surgery with prosthetic limbs. The possibility of cloning is seen within the genome project (the mapping of an organism's DNA), which allows scientists to manipulate DNA. Using cyborg feminism, scholars can study how cyborg technology impacts women's empowerment. This helps to expand the criteria for women's empowerment. In society, women as a social class are influenced by the representation of women's empowerment in film. A female audience may identify with the female characters and watch as she attempts to break free from the patriarchal bonds that confine her. Films reflect societal norms that surround the distribution of power and gender relations. By analyzing science fiction and horror films, we can see how female characters are affected by male dominated technology. Patriarchal control over technology is not only observed in society but also portrayed in films. I urge scholars who study women's empowerment and technology in film to incorporate a revised criteria for empowerment into their examination of science fiction and horror films. By analyzing the protagonist's relationship to technology, it becomes clear whether or not the female characters are empowering. As such, I propose two questions that scholars may consider when conducting an analysis: 1) who controls cyborg technology and 2) who benefits from cyborg technology?

Within film, technology is typically controlled by men. Patriarchal power controls cyborg technology, which in turn, impacts the potential for female empowerment. Because of this, it is useful to reconsider the human-nonhuman dichotomy and the male-female dichotomy. The relationships between gender dichotomy and cyborg technology has been observed in several science fiction and horror films such as *Metropolis* (1927). In this film, the female human Maria is replicated into a female cyborg manufactured and

programmed by a man named Rotwang. Here, there is an unequal distribution of power between Rotwang and the cyborg Maria. Like many other science fiction and horror films addressing cyborg technology, men control the female cyborg creature effectively denying the female's right of physical, sexual, and reproductive anatomy. The cloned female species is at the mercy of male domination. We see this male domination over female cyborgs in *The Stepford Wives*. Cyborg housewives are artificial women who lack the ability to produce offspring. Men control their reproduction by eliminating their ability to have children. They were invented as sexual objects of desire. Men expect this new female species to accommodate their needs and replace their human wives. Men are portrayed as scientists, engineers, and/or computer programmers who are in a position of power to make decisions benefiting themselves. Therefore, the female remains in a position of limited power.

However, what if the human female controlled all aspects of reproduction instead of the human male? Controlling reproduction means controlling one type of cyborg technology, which implies modifying the body to accommodate one's self. The human Other could modify the body by producing the perfect husband who caters to her needs and interests. In *The Stepford Wives*, Dale suggests this idea to Joanna by saying, "See, think of it the other way around, wouldn't you like some perfect stud waiting on you around the house, praising you, servicing you, whispering how your sagging flesh was beautiful no matter how you looked?" If the human female invented her own version of an artificial male body, then she could program him to fulfill her physical, sexual, and emotional desires. Constructing a new male body would indicate control over replication. Control over replication is a step toward achieving female empowerment and advances



the potential for women's empowerment through technology in the Information Age. With the potential to achieve empowerment, women could hold greater power and authority over men and cyborg technology. Instead of remaining an oppressed victim, the human female would become the oppressor.

Both *The Stepford Wives* and *Metropolis* provide examples of why scholars studying women's empowerment through technology in science fiction and horror films must examine the criteria for empowerment more closely. Unfortunately, there is a lack of scholarship referencing women's empowerment as it relates to technology in science fiction and horror film. Although there is much scholarship on cyborg technology in the scientific field, there is limited scholarship on this technology within film and how it applies to female empowerment. I suggest two reasons to explain why this is the case. First, cyborg feminism is still a relatively new field. Second, the majority of scholarship on cyborg technology within film refers to one type of cyborg technology—cyborg creatures, not specifically *female* cyborg creatures. Male cyborg creatures rather than female cyborg creatures are most often present in popular science fiction and horror films. For this reason, *The Stepford Wives* is a unique film because it is one of few popular science fiction and horror films that include female cyborg creatures. Also, it is one of the few films that has yet prompted *any* scholarship addressing this type of cyborg technology and its effect on women's empowerment.

In conclusion, the protagonists of *Fatal Attraction*, *Aliens* and *The Stepford Wives* are not empowering for women because they support the patriarchal nuclear family. Although the protagonist is granted provisional access to power as a human, she does not acquire power as a woman, and she thus fails to be empowering for women as a

social class. My analysis suggests that the protagonist is empowering through her species rather than through her gender. These protagonists are granted some power *in spite of* their femaleness, but only so long as they are useful to patriarchy. Their allegiance lies with their species, rather than with their gender. The unique application of species is a new way to apply the concept of the Other. If scholars apply species to the Other, then they will provide a new insight into analyzing nonhumans and the human/nonhuman binary, as well as providing new insight into female empowerment. Scholars who study women's empowerment in film must take into consideration different factors when approaching the criteria for empowerment. I believe it is essential to expand on the criteria for women's empowerment by looking at the protagonist's relationship between the antagonist and technology. In doing so, scholars ask questions about who controls, and who benefits, from the Information Age. The answers to these questions allow for a more thorough understanding of technology, gender, and species as it relates to, and affects, female empowerment.

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