MONSTRUM 8.2 (December 2025) | ISSN 2561-5629

"All Mixed Up": *It's Alive, It Lives Again*, and Kristeva's Maternal *Herethics*

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> "When I was a kid, I always thought the monster was Frankenstein…. Then I went to high school and read the book and I realized that Frankenstein was the doctor who created him. Somehow, the identities get all mixed up, don't they?"
> –Frank Davis, *It's Alive* (1974)

> "Monster. They use that word too easily, don't they? Because it's different. I wounded my own child, but he forgave me. Is that an animal? Is it? Is that a monster that can forgive?"
> —Frank Davis, *It Lives Again* (1978)

In a typical horror film about a killer baby, one might reasonably assume the protagonist to be the child's mother. But in his cult classic *It's Alive* (1974) Larry Cohen turns his attention away from maternal themes to focus squarely on the horrors of fatherhood, reflecting the contemporary crisis of masculinity brought on by the ongoing Vietnam War, the broader disillusionment that began with the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, and even Cold War anxieties. *It's Alive* belongs to a larger group of horror films that include *Last House on the Left* (1972), *Deathdream* (1974), and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), all of which explore the destabilization of patriarchal hegemony in America. This disruption contested the tidy division between internal safety and external threat: communist spies infiltrating American society, racial and gender barriers being challenged, nuclear and chemical warfare changing the molecular makeup of organic life forms, and environmental activists calling into question the difference between human and animal. *It's Alive* engages particularly with the breakdown of distinctions between human and nonhuman animal. An abject disgust with what he perceives to be *animal* is precisely what initially fuels Frank Davis, the protagonist father of *It's Alive*, in his mission to destroy his murderous child. Interestingly, Frank is not the hypermasculine figure we might expect, but rather is anxious and emotional, embodying the shifts in hegemonic

masculinity in the 1970s. Instead of reducing the Davis family's plight to cheap exploitation fare, Cohen uses *It's Alive* to chart out not only the disruption of hegemonic masculinity but also a potentially redemptive conclusion for father and child. The idea of the acceptance of the abject Other across the boundary of difference has been well-articulated in Julia Kristeva's radical reformulation of Freudian identity formation she terms *herethics*. She argues that bridging binary difference can allow for both a radically transformative ethics and a pragmatically actionable politics. When Frank unlearns the normative subject-object framework that categorizes his child as a dangerous aberration, he becomes able to collapse the socially constructed distance between himself and his son and learn to love *herethically*.

Much of the small body of academic literature around *It's Alive* limits its focus to the film's relation to abortion politics. Feminist scholar Erin Harrington sees the film's stance as a continuation of the long history of blaming birthing and child issues on the choices of the mother, arguing that this history "directly draws from historic assertions that congenital deformities were caused by a woman's monstrous maternal imagination affecting the child in utero" (2018, 123). Indeed, it is revealed later in the film that Frank and his wife Lenore requested a consultation for an abortion, though ultimately decided against it. However, the blame in the end is placed on Lenore's usage of fertility medication, which perhaps suggests that the real problem at hand is the use of artificial drugs and chemicals to alter natural, biological systems, whether to produce children or not. This makes even more sense considering the intense media coverage around the thalidomide crisis earlier in the 70s, which increased the general American anxiety around pharmaceutical interventions concerning conception, pregnancy, and birth.[1]

In response to contemporary accusations of the film's supposed pro-life politics by pro-choice advocates, writer-director Larry Cohen clarified that *It's Alive* is far more concerned with the alienation between the hippie generation and their parents than in making a glib statement on the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision: "The parents didn't understand who was in their house, how this person came about. This wasn't the child they raised. And in a number of cases fathers actually killed their children, shot their teenage sons who came home stoned and the parents were terrified" (qtd. in Maddrey, 143–4).[2] Further, even though the mutation in the Davis baby is due to fertility

[1] For more on this, see Hantke (2011).

[2] Maddrey cites *Clive Barker's A to Z of Horror*, compiled by Stephen Jones. BBC Books, 1997, 196.

medication, the blame in *It's Alive* is explicitly placed on the pharmaceutical industry instead of resting on Lenore. In fact, one of the most chilling scenes of the film is a conversation between a representative from the pharmaceutical company that produced the drug and a member of the investigation team; the representative coerces the investigator to ensure that the child is completely annihilated instead of merely killed so no tests can be conducted that would trace the blame to the company. In the words of Tony Williams, "*It's Alive* develops the premises of the *Frankenstein* saga to their most logical conclusions by affirming solidarity between creator and monster against the real enemy—institutional forces of law, medicine, and family" (qtd. in Maddrey 2010, 54).[3] Cohen wanted to subvert such structures. In his own explanation, he had "always been interested in anyone who lives on the edge of what is, supposedly, accepted normality" (141).[4] With his interests in generational difference and institutional oppression, Cohen's aims in the film are clearly more existential than directed towards a reductive misogyny. Instead of being obliquely pro-life, *It's Alive* is much more concerned with the egregious acts of heteropatriarchal capitalist America than with the choices of the individual. And, most importantly, the panning of *It's Alive* by feminists (see, e.g., Renner 2016, Harrington 2018) completely disregards the film's ending. Both the original film and its 1978 sequel *It Lives Again* portray initially fearful, unfeeling fathers who eventually grow to see their children with love and compassion, beyond the constructed distance of subject-object disgust.

As such, *It's Alive* and its sequel fit into Robin Wood's categorization of radical or progressive horror films—works that challenge the clearcut binary between normality and monstrosity (1979, 22). Wood sources this dichotomy in "the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses" (1979, 10). Whereas at first, Frank Davis hates his child in a classic instance of abjection—the horror of the heterogenous that cannot be divorced from the self but must, at all costs, be destroyed or expelled—the film makes an unexpected flip in showing how he could somehow change his perspective and learn to radically love his child. In one sense, the child represents something of the monstrous-feminine, which in Barbara Creed's terms would indicate a kind of primal "border" figure existing "between the mother-child relationship" (1999, 252); yet there is no overt maternal connection made in the film beyond

[3] The Williams passage is from *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 1996, 175.

[4] Maddrey cites *Larry Cohen: The Radical Allegories of an Independent Filmmaker*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996, 352.

its birth link to the mother. Instead, the child is abject due to its relation to Frank: violent, aggressive, yet vulnerable.

Though Frank's ultimate transformation into a caring father could be read through myriad lenses, including most notably animal rights ethics, I have found Kristeva's notion of the "herethical"—"ethics divorced from morals" (1985, 152)—to be the most productive for my purposes.[5] For Kristeva, morals are linked to institutional and paternal norms, whereas ethics are closely related to the psychoanalytical and the situational. Further, she finds the anchor of ethics to be rooted not in what Lacan called a subject of desire—which becomes almost immediately relativistic—but rather a subject of responsibility, which Mitchell Wilson sums up as involving, "the assumption of responsibility for one's desire in all its complexity, in all its 'problematic'" (2014, 109). This more responsive and caring subject is "responsible *in relation to the other* in its various personal incarnations—one's child, partner, and community—as well as to oneself" (Wilson 2014, 109, original emphasis). Kristeva arrives at this herethical stance by formulating an alternative psychoanalytic model of identity formation to Freudian and Lacanian phallocentrism. Where Freud and Lacan argue that symbolic castration (the child's recognition of lack) and submission to the Law of the Father (of the symbolic phallus) are necessary to enter the symbolic realm and thus form subjective identity, Kristeva argues that we should instead understand ourselves psychoanalytically through the form of the maternal body. She asks the daring question: How can the mother's pregnant body provide a more meaningful alternative metaphor for the problem of difference? According to Kelly Oliver's reading of Kristeva, "[p]regnancy…is a case in which identity contains alterity as a heterogenous other without completely losing its integrity, in which the very notion of identity and difference are called into question" (1998, 77). During pregnancy the mother has to face the fact that there is something different growing within her. There is a heterogenous other that cannot be expulsed immediately, and even when it is, must be tenderly fed and nurtured. The mother must maintain her own identity, accept that she is subject to internal alterity, and love that subject that is not really her self, but not really Other, either.

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[5] For more on the role of animal rights themes in horror cinema and its disruption of the human-nonhuman binary see *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History, and Criticism,* ed. Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, Nicklas Hållén (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). The authors note that, similar to the child in *It's Alive*, in animal horror cinema, "the animal seeks to challenge the predominance of the human through physical, sometimes consumptive, violence. In this way, it is the dangerous and transgressive animal that elicits suspense and fear in animal horror cinema" (5).

This is the herethical turn, in which we love our children without expecting them to conform to the Law of the Father. When we understand identity formation through this radical acceptance of the abject, herethical love springs up against the destructive impulse deemed inevitable by phallocentrism. Although Frank is initially able to relationally disentangle himself from his child (as is often easier for fathers to do), he cannot truly escape from the fact of his fatherhood. He is not the child's mother, so Kristeva's maternal metaphor might appear to be tenuous, but he still finds himself hopelessly bound up in his child's disruption of the self/Other or normality/monstrosity binary. By reading the radical transformation in the fathers of *It's Alive* and *It Lives Again* affirmatively, through a Kristevan herethical lens, I will demonstrate how the films, despite their superficial appearance, show a fleeting vision of how fathers might escape the constraints of patriarchal masculinity to maintain subjectivity and form identity through the destruction of the threatening abject and instead radically accepting the alterity of their mutant children with fierce love.

It's Alive **and the Intrusion of the** ***Herethical***

The title of *It's Alive* (1974) is an obvious allusion to James Whale's 1931 film adaption of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) in which Dr. Frankenstein repeats the line in reference to his newly vivified creation. Cohen's film follows unassuming Los Angeles couple Frank and Lenore Davis as they grapple with the moral quandary of what to do with a monstrous child that has a penchant for murder.[6] The child escapes from the delivery room after killing everyone except Lenore, and the majority of the rest of the film depicts Frank's cooperation with local authorities in a manhunt for the child, until the moment he reaches a different understanding of and empathy with it. Frank starts out completely willing to destroy his child by any means necessary. While at first the audience can reasonably assume Frank's cooperation with the police is merely born of his concern for public safety, it quickly becomes clear that it is far more personal than that. Throughout the search for the child, he repeats "It's not my child!"; or, more poignantly, "It's no relation to me!" It is here when Frank betrays the source of his destructive impulse: his abject fear of a child that transgresses biological and social norms. In Kristeva's words, "what is abject … the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where

[6] Frank's name also nods to Frankenstein, the father figure who takes the power of creation from the mother.

meaning collapses" (1982, 2). The threat of the collapse of the symbolic order, of the terms which provide clear ontological boundaries such as *I* and *You* and *I* and *It* is embodied in the Davis Child. Frank comes to understand this later on in talking with the investigators when he somberly observes, "When I was a kid, I always thought the monster was Frankenstein… Then I went to high school and read the book and I realized that Frankenstein was the doctor who created him. Somehow, the identities get all mixed up, don't they?" Interestingly, the authorities involved read the child as an animal. In a discussion with Frank, they assert, "It kills like an animal. And when we find it, we'll have to destroy it like one." By identifying with his child Frank risks relating to something nonhuman, or at least not entirely human, thereby exiting the hegemonic safety of the human-nonhuman/subject-object regime.

The pursuit of the child takes Frank and the police force into the sewers, where the child has retreated after Frank shot him at an encounter in the Davis home. Frank is insistent that he be the one to do the job, although he begins to appear more unsure and unsettled as he descends into the sewer tunnels to seek out the retreating wounded child. It is fitting that sewer tunnels should be the setting for Frank's transformation because waste is what Kristeva first explores as abject in *Powers of Horror*: "The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them" (1982, 2). The sewer also finds a parallel in the moment of birth, that site of waste: umbilical cord, afterbirth, placenta, blood, urine, feces, and also the formation of new life. Abjection, whether in the sewer or birth, both beckons and disgusts.

When Frank finally finds his child, when his gun is cocked and the monstrous baby trembles before him waiting to be shot, he cannot destroy his child. What holds him back? And what causes him to instead scoop the child up into his caress and whisper, "I know. I know it hurts. I know that, but everything's going to be all right. See, I was, I was scared, like you are"? A partial answer lies in this reassurance. Frank admits that his fear is no different than his son's; he allows identification with his son. This is a deep subversion of a phallocentric model of identity formation in which the child must both submit to the Will of the Father and also admit he is not the Father. Frank is the one admitting to containing some sort of internal alterity that must not only be retained but somehow cherished. He reaches across the line from normality to alterity, no longer claiming "not me, not that!" but instead accepting that "this is also me." Here we see Kristeva's radical notion of the herethical come into play.

This herethical crossing makes sense particularly within the historical context of *It's Alive*, and the 1970s as a decade defined by a crisis of masculinity. The hippie generation, as already noted, threatened the patriarchy and the nuclear family. Burgeoning second-wave feminism questioned the role men ought to play in society and if there was any place at all for conventional notions of fatherhood or masculinity. This crisis, as it has extended through the decades, is what Kristeva was responding to in some sense with her maternal model of psychoanalysis. According to Kelly Oliver, "the crisis in the paternal function is a welcome crisis in the authoritarian reign of the stern father. [Kristeva] imagines that this crisis can and must open the possibility for a loving father, a fantasy of union through and because of difference" (1998, 78). This is the change we see in Frank. He does not develop love for his child by realizing he can rule it or master it with stern direction. He does not pretend that this child is or ever could be anything other than a part of himself. Instead, he accepts the otherness of this strange offspring and thus demonstrates what could only be called love. And yet such love cannot be easily sustained in the capitalistic, patriarchal world in which Frank finds himself. As he tries to escape with his baby, he is eventually caught by the police, and the child is murdered. In the closing shot of the film, we find out that another mutant child has been born in Seattle, suggesting that alterity cannot ever be truly extinguished, but instead continues to recover and regenerate.

It Lives Again and the Fragile Politic of Love

In *It Lives Again* (1978) Frank has transformed into a radical political activist. As hinted at the end of the original film, the Davis child was merely the first of many mutant babies born. Frank makes it his singular goal in life to ensure that other fathers do not make the same mistakes he did. *It Lives Again* centers around Eugene and Joan Scott who give birth to a mutant child similar to Frank's, and their struggle to decide whether to destroy or accept their baby boy. Eugene ultimately charts a path toward redemption, making his storyline an echo of Frank's in *It's Alive*. Frank's role as a supporting character is far more interesting because it illustrates the intentional turn from the familial to the political.

Julia Kristeva made the same turn in her work. For nearly a decade, she refused to politicize her psychoanalytic work, but in a surprising turn, she released *Strangers to Ourselves*, which concludes that "[t]he ethic of psychoanalysis implies a politics" (1991, 284). She argues further that using a maternal

herethical model of psychoanalysis calls for a "paradoxical community" (1991, 290) in which internal alterity is accepted and cherished. This is exactly the kind of world that Frank imagines for the monstrous children, one of communal integration and love. Before the Scott child is born, Frank visits the Scotts and pleads with Joan to give birth in a secure facility. Eugene argues that if the child is indeed a mutant, it should be destroyed. With tears in his eyes, Frank responds: "Monster. They use that word too easily, don't they? Because it's different. I wounded my own child, but he forgave me. Is that an animal? Is it? Is that a monster that can forgive?"

While Frank takes a clear position towards the children, some of the other scientists committed to protecting the children have more sinister motives. Dr. Perry, one of Frank's fellow activists, names two of the rescued children Adam and Eve because he believes that they are the beginning of a new species that will overtake humans. He sees them as powerful superhumans and keeps them in cages, to breed them and eventually use them for likely malicious purposes. When the mutant babies inevitably escape, they immediately murder Dr. Perry and the other scientists who saw the children as abject creatures. From the perspective of the babies, it is not unreasonable to kill the institutional oppressors that kept them from parental nurture. Dr. Perry has made a mistake in assuming that since the children are different from humans they do not share human needs.

Frank, on the other hand, cares for the children to the bitter end. After the police raid the facility where the children are being kept, he escapes into the surrounding forest with one of the babies in his arms. When he runs into an aggressive security guard, the baby responds in fear and accidentally kills Frank in the crossfire. Even as the child is biting his neck, Frank holds it in a lingering embrace. It is important that Frank is not only dedicated to protecting his own child, but that, through the experience that has radicalized him, he is an advocate for all of these monster-children that threaten the normative order. Within the historical context in which the hippies presented such a disruptive aberration from the American hegemony, Cohen advocates here for the unconditional acceptance and radical empathy as political values. Instead of forcing his child into conformity, Frank is transformed by his child. This is the herethical politic, where community is constructed "through and because of difference" (Oliver 1998, 78). In their embrace of a radical empathy for the abject human-animal other, the *It's Alive* films parallel the kinds of empathy that extend to the nonhuman animal, also making these films potential allegories for a transformative cross-species identification.

Conclusion: Love and Horror

While horror is almost always interested exploring abject boundary transgressions, these disruptions are rarely as ultimately affirmative and redemptive as in *It's Alive* and *It Lives Again*. In following Frank's journey to accepting his own son, and then his crusade to protect similar children, a Kristevan herethical sense of love—on personal, communal, and political levels—surfaces. In a conservative sense of culture, the monster is that which must be assimilated, destroyed, put away, or rejected. But the mutant child of *It's Alive* gestures to an older, more symbolic understanding of the monster—one that leads to radically other physically and socially embodied possibilities. In the words of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "[a] construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals', 'that which warns', a glyph that seeks a hierophant" (1996, 4, original emphasis). Where the Romans always understood the "monstrum" as a warning of something terrible, using Kristeva's herethical lens flips the monster's abject difference on its head. When we understand the monster to be hopelessly entangled in our own flawed identities, we can see it as a warning and a revelation of the contradictions inherent to human nature.

The *It's Alive* films' allegorical power is to force us to rethink our relationships between the normative and the other(ed). Larry Cohen, like Kristeva, meant this in a direct political sense, which is particularly apparent in the third and final installment in the trilogy, *It's Alive III: Island of the Alive* (1987). In the film, several of the children reach maturity and build a sort of community on a remote island in the Caribbean. More than in the two previous films, *It's Alive III* explores what might occur when two opposing cultures clash in an often bloody but potentially transformative conflict. With radical acceptance and love blurring the line between human and nonhuman, the *It's Alive* films invite us to see the nonhuman animal, the monster, or any Other not as a threat, but as an invitation to transformation.

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- 2025 -

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