

# Alien

(Scott, 1979)

**Component 1 Section A: Hollywood 1930 – 1990 (comparative study)**

**Core study areas:**

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response**
- **Contexts of film**



Image by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation / Cnet.com

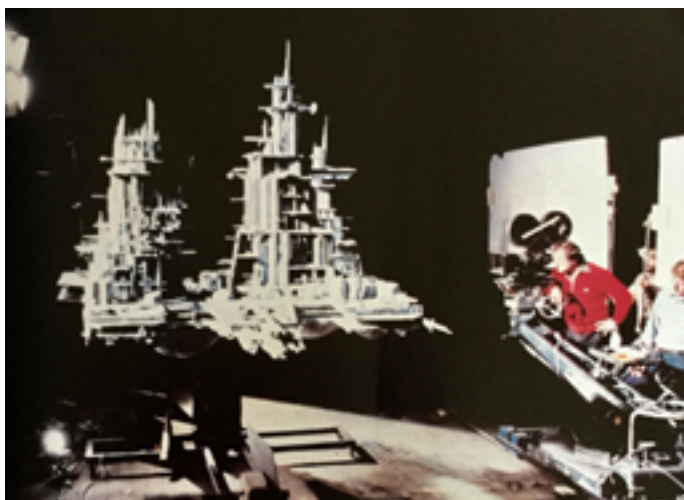


Image by Michael Scanlon & Michael Gross / Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation / Retrosconfart.tumblr.com

**Rationale for study:**

- According to *The Independent*, *Alien* is ‘one of the most influential films in recent history’ (2019). *Alien* follows the crew of a commercial spacecraft in 2122 who encounter a deadly lifeform after investigating an unknown transmission on a nearby moon.
- Released in 1979, not only was *Alien* a commercial success, but it has been poured over by academics and fans for decades. It is a film which offers visceral thrills as well as cerebral themes and fascinating sub-textual elements.
- Ridley Scott’s film career was in its infancy in 1979, but his authorial signature was starting to form, and this film contributed toward his popularity as a mainstream film artist.
- The film is also interesting when read against (mainstream) cinema history, which has in part been rooted in monsters. *King Kong*, *Godzilla*, *Dracula*, *The Mummy* and *Frankenstein’s Monster* were all frightening stars in the classical years of filmmaking. However, *Alien’s* Xenomorph was at the forefront of a new generation of creatures that terrified cinemagoers.
- The representation of Ripley as a strong and independent woman has been admired by critics, scholars and audiences, so much so that she was labelled a transgressive and challenging character by the film scholar Yvonne Tasker (1993). The film works on several levels and is sure to provide many fascinating debates and textual readings in class.

## STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:

1. Discovering the abandoned ship and alien eggs: 24:14 – 34:42
2. Chest burster Scene: 54:36 – 56:55
3. “Here, Jonesy” - Xenomorph appears: 1:03:00 – 1:08:06

## Core study area 1 – Film form

### Cinematography

- Wide angle shots are utilised to show setting and to add to the visual spectacle of sequences, such as when they land on the nearby moon to investigate the mysterious transmission.
- As can be seen in the image on page 1, you can see that Ridley Scott filmed in a slow frame rate to give the models the appearance of motion.
- Over the shoulder shots are used to effect, such as in the scene when Parker dies; this makes it seem like we are there with Parker fighting against the alien.
- High angle shots are sometimes employed to create a sense of scale as to how big the alien is compared to the crew.
- Tim Pelan writes that in *Alien*, ‘the camera is never still, our wary eye on what horrors are to come down these shock corridors.’

### Mise-en-scène and lighting

- H. R. Giger and Ridley Scott were crucial in the formation of the visual design of the intricate mise-en-scène and the alien monster. The alien monster, Xenomorph, has been read as a psychosexual symbol, which is typical of H. R. Giger’s artwork. Xenomorph’s head is phallic shaped, various face-hugger and egg openings have been read as vaginal, and the alien’s life cycle is presented with rape metaphors.
- This has thematic significance as Scott and his team made this decision to shock the audience and make them feel uncomfortable. In the 2002 TV documentary *The Alien Saga*, *Alien* screenwriter Dan O’Bannon explained, ‘I’m going to attack the audience. I’m going to attack them sexually.’

- The mise-en-scène of the spaceship is industrial as well as being ‘futuristic’. This adds to the verisimilitude of the film and anchors the ‘truckers in space’ theme.
- The ship has been read as a character in its own right, with its unsettling feeling – cluttered spaces, human detritus and darkened corridors add to the moody atmosphere.
- This atmosphere is also reinforced using low-key lighting, which makes certain parts of the spaceship seem moody and dangerous, adding to the darker tone of the film.

### Sound

- Sound is used very effectively in *Alien*. The non-diegetic sound adds tension, dread and excitement to the atmosphere of some scenes.
- In parts, diegetic sound is amplified. In the scene before the full-grown Xenomorph kills Brett, we hear sounds of clinking chains and drops of water (which we would not normally hear so clearly).
- Deep bass sounds are sometimes employed to subconsciously conjure fear in the viewer, adding an uncanny effect to some of the sequences.
- Sound is crucial to jump scares, and loud non-diegetic sounds are added to some tense sequences to frighten the viewer. This is a conventional aspect to most horror films.
- A frantic, loud score is utilised to add excitement and tension to key sequences, especially in the last twenty minutes of the film. This is conventional of action, thriller, horror and science fiction films.

### Performance

- Charles Graham-Dixon writes that *Alien* shows ‘a credible vision of blue-collar working life that still feels authentic four decades later’ (2019). Some people have called the workers ‘truckers in space’, which has working-class connotations.

- The performance of the characters adds to this element, as they discuss working conditions, contractual obligations and other responsibilities in a realistic manner; sometimes the discussions are pragmatic, whereas other times they are emotion-driven.
- In the moment leading up to the chest burst, the characters sit around eating, chatting, laughing and talking over each other.
- The performances are believable and authentic, which allows viewers to identify with a range of characters, especially Ripley.
- Sigourney Weaver's performance of Ripley is strong and rational, which allows her to stand out as a powerful heroine.
- Yvonne Tasker, a film scholar who has written about action cinema and female heroism, states that Ripley is one of 'Hollywood's most visible action heroines', and that she raises 'interesting questions of symbolic transgression' (1993: p.15). In other words, Ripley is an interesting symbol of powerful and non-stereotypical femininity, who transgresses gendered norms. However, in the last scene, there is a moment where Ripley undresses down to her vest and underpants and is partially objectified. Tasker points this scene out in her book *Spectacular Bodies* (1993), and she writes that this moment relates to 'the limits and possibilities of the cinematic representation of the action heroine' (1993: p.15). These limits include how female heroines can often be sexualised whilst also transgressing gendered norms, such as being strong and active.

## Core study area 2 – Meaning and response

### Representations

#### Gender

- In Dan O'Bannon's original script, the crew members were not gendered – the producers could have cast any gender for the role of Ripley, and any gender for other key parts, such as the captain and Ash. Moreover, the dialogue did not change when casting the characters, and there was a note at the start of the script that said that 'the crew is unisex, and all parts are interchangeable'. This is uncommon in the film industry, especially in the late 1970s.
- Ripley is one of the most celebrated female heroines in cinema history. Looking at the image above, she is represented as capable, rational and strong. She defeats the alien and is the only crew member to survive. She is similar to the 'Final Girl' seen in slasher films such as *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Scream*. She is also continually ignored throughout the film, such as when she instructs Ash to not let Kane in (as he needs to quarantine for 24 hours) but is disobeyed. This may signify a broader comment about how women are not taken seriously in society or at work and may symbolise patriarchal domination. However, this is later overcome in the narrative by Ripley being the resourceful Final Girl.

#### Age

- The film features a range of ages, from performers aged 29 (Veronica Cartwright) up to 53-years-old (Harry Dean Stanton). Roger Ebert states that this mix of younger and middle-aged people helps the film to achieve 'a certain texture without even making a point of it: these [the crew] are not adventurers but workers' (2003). This also adds to the 'truckers in space' theme.
- The varied ages of the crew, paired with how none of them are conventionally beautiful or attractive, allows the film to feel more realistic and adds to the verisimilitude of the diegesis.

#### Ethnicity

- Whilst there is diversity in regard to age, there is a lack of varied ethnic representation in *Alien*. The film mainly features White characters, with one Black character (Parker, played by Yaphet Kotto).
- Parker is murdered by the alien, in the style of the slasher horror films of the 1970s and 1980s. This type of murder was a trope in horror films in the 1970s and 1980s where characters from ethnic minority backgrounds were killed off or symbolically annihilated.

## Aesthetics

- Ridley Scott wanted to achieve a ‘haunted house in space’ vibe with *Alien*. Therefore, the film has, in part, a gothic aesthetic with lots of low-key lighting, shadows and fog/steam.
- The film broadly conforms to a ‘horror aesthetic’, much more so than many other science fiction films or its sequel *Aliens* (1986).
- Cathal Gunning writes that ‘visually positing the film as a slasher set in space was an effective way of informing audiences that, despite the interplanetary setting, this was very much a straightforward horror’ (2021).
- Charles Graham-Dixon notes that *Alien*’s ‘industrial yet futuristic production aesthetic retains a cutting-edge realism’ (2019).
- The film blends a stylised, horror aesthetic with a more believable and authentic aesthetic. This heightened realism contributes towards a more terrifying and creepy mood for the viewer.

## Core study area 3 – Contexts

### Industrial

- *Alien* was produced in the second round of New Hollywood. The first round of New Hollywood (which emerged in the late sixties and early seventies) was experimental with style and narrative, and was influenced by European aesthetics (especially French, German, and Italian styles). Some examples include *Bonnie & Clyde*, *The Graduate*, *Midnight Cowboy*, and *The Conversation*.
- New Hollywood Part II is more synonymous with the advent of the ‘blockbuster’. These were sometimes cerebral films created for the masses with popular themes and genres. This ‘round’ of New Hollywood began with *Jaws* (1975), and other popular examples include *Star Wars: A New Hope*, *Rocky*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Indiana Jones*. *Alien* has been labelled, by some, as ‘the most influential of modern action pictures’ (Ebert, 2003), and symbolises New Hollywood’s (part II) connection between intelligent themes and studio genre filmmaking.
- *Alien* is widely seen as a studio genre film (usually dominated by economic and capitalist ideologies), but still containing ‘artistic’ elements. These include a striking visual style, genre hybridity and cerebral themes.

### Social, historical and cultural

- Second wave feminism was well and truly underway by the time *Alien* was released. Second wave feminism, which began in the 1960s, was marked by both an intellectual and practical resistance to patriarchal cultures, and strongly advocated for women’s equality in the home, in the workplace and in society more broadly.
- It can be argued that this ‘equality’ is reflected in *Alien*, through the character of Ripley, who defies the odds and survives when no one else does.

### Specialist area – auteur

- Scott’s roots are in art direction for the BBC and in the advertising industry, and he created his own company in the late 1960s. Scott is an auteur filmmaker broadly based on the strict adherence to his personal artistic vision, as well as desire to control elements of production.
- Scott’s films are typically recognisable by their play of light and shadow, and near-lascivious love of sprawling wide shots and intricate detail within the mise-en-scène. Moreover, Roger Ebert noted that Scott’s films (ranging from *Alien* to *Thelma & Louise* to *Gladiator*) ‘are simultaneously commercial and intelligent projects, made by a director who wants to attract a large audience but doesn’t care to insult it’ (2003). In other words, Scott’s films are both popular and cerebral. They are simultaneously mainstream and artistic.
- *Alien* is a useful case study for critically evaluating auteur theory. Auteur theory asserts that the director is the major driving force in the production of a film; they’re the author of the work akin to the author of a novel or a collection of poems. However, filmmaking is a collaborative process whereby many different people have a hand in creating a film, its narrative and its visual style. When criticising the auteur theory, consider the following people who helped make *Alien*.

### The screenwriter

- *Alien* was written for the screen by Dan O'Bannon. O'Bannon devised the original plot for the film; he was the person who decided that the alien would enter the spaceship by involving a human crewmember in its life cycle, and he also created the 'stalker' approach of the alien killing the crew one by one.
- However, this narrative had been used before in media texts, such as *Star Trek*. The completed script was almost sold to Roger Corman's production company, which would have made *Alien* a low-budget, exploitation movie (a 'B Movie'). Due to other reasons, this did not happen, but O'Bannon would have let it go forward. This signifies how his auteur status is debatable.
- Later in the process, Ron Shusett was involved, who produced the idea of the alien bursting through the chest of its first victim (played by John Hurt). This is a significant narrative and symbolic moment, which may give some claim to how important Shusett was in the production process.

### The production designer

- H. R. Giger was a crucial figure in designing the unique alien monster. The monster's appearance was unexpected at the time, and its design was effective in communicating the undercurrent of symbolic sexual violence throughout the film. However, Dan O'Bannon brought him into the project, which again may provide some evidence that O'Bannon was an 'auteur'.

### The editors

- Editing is a particularly important process when making any moving-image text. This is where the narrative is threaded together, where temporality is created and where the 'flow' of the film is formulated. *Alien* was co-edited by Terry Rawlings and Peter Weatherley.

- Rawlings had also edited films such as *Blade Runner* (another Ridley Scott film), *Chariots of Fire*, *Yentl*, *Goldeneye*, and *The Core*. Weatherley was less prolific in his career, and edited horror films and TV shows, such as *Hammer House of Horror* and *Creepshow 2*. Watch some clips from these films and consider the extent to which the editors' style(s) is apparent in *Alien*.

### The performers

- Performers can contribute toward a film's mood, tone and narrative. They not only interpret and, therefore, embody a character, but can also input their opinion on character development and plot events. Hitchcock once famously said that actors are merely 'cattle', and this is worth exploring.
- Furthermore, Scott himself suggested that he knew the visuals were going to occupy most of his attention and efforts on-set, and that he needed a cast that did not need much support or guidance. This meant that the performers had to almost conceive the characters' nuances, gestures and personalities independently. We could argue that they were active agents in the process of making meaning and effect. This is significant in criticising the idea that Scott is the 'author' of *Alien*.

### The composer (score)

- Non-diegetic sound is a crucial aspect of film form which generates meaning, response and effect, and can guide the viewer's emotions. The score can explicitly/implicitly communicate to audiences how they should feel and how they should respond to the narrative and the performances. Jerry Goldsmith was the composer for *Alien*, and has worked on 256 projects, including *Gremlins*, *Poltergeist*, *The Omen*, *Chinatown*, *Air Force One* and *The Mummy*. He is known for his epic, thunderous scores. Consider how important Goldsmith is in making meaning in *Alien*, and how he could have a claim in being one of the (many) authors of the film.

## KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:

“Here, Jonesy” In 1:03:00 Out 1:08:06

- This scene features the first appearance of the matured Xenomorph.
- For context: Brett (Harry Dean Stanton) has been dispatched by senior officers Parker (Yaphet Kotto) and Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) to recover the lost cat, Jonesy, amidst the deadly backdrop of the hunt for the alien.
- Throughout the scene, Scott expertly weaves micro-elements such as continuity editing, sound and mise-en-scène to signify the tense and creepy atmosphere.
- In his article *Projections of Sound on Image*, Michael Chion explains film sound’s potential to usher in ‘added value’. In the earlier moments of the sequence, there is exaggerated sound of chains and dripping water. This symbolises the industrial nature of the spaceship, and also adds to the gothic aesthetic. Therefore, the sound ‘adds value’ to the tone and mood.
- Lighting, especially low-key lighting, also ‘adds value’ to this scene. The low-key lighting anchors the theme of the alien “lurking in the shadows”, like the masked killer in slasher horror films. Because of the dark, low-key lighting, we cannot see Brett’s surroundings clearly and, therefore, it positions the viewer to identify with Brett’s feeling of unease.
- The scene crosscuts between Brett trying to lure Jonesy out of the corner of the room, and what is going on behind Brett – the Xenomorph appearing. This constructs dramatic irony, as the viewer can see the alien, but Brett cannot. We know what will happen before he does.
- When the Xenomorph appears, the camera captures it in close-up, and tilts as the alien moves upward. This functions to highlight the size of the alien and its terrifying appearance.
- When the Xenomorph strikes Brett, the editing speeds up and does not allow the viewer to fully see the violence. Instead, the camera focuses on Jonesy watching the action. Showing Jonesy’s face, instead of any explicit gore or violence, also allows the viewer’s imagination to take over and is a technique often found in horror films.

## References

Chion, Michael. (2019). *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Columbia University Press

Ebert, Roger. (2003). Review: *Alien*: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-alien-1979>

Graham, Dixon. (2019). ‘Alien at 40: in space no one can hear your plea for workers’ rights’, *BFI*: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/alien-40-ridley-scott-sigourney-weaver>

Gunning, Cathal. (2021). ‘Why Each Alien Movie Looks So Different,’ *Screen rant*: <https://screenrant.com/alien-aliens-movies-sequels-different-aesthetic-why/>

Pelan, Tim, ‘40 Years of Hurt, Face-Hugging Dreams of Breathing: Ridley Scott’s ‘Alien’’, *Cinephilia and Beyond*: <https://cinephiliabeyond.org/alien-40th-anniversary/>

Tasker, Yvonne. (1993). *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Action Cinema*, London: Routledge

Images used within this resource are used for educational (non-commercial) purposes only, to facilitate learning and to further explain concepts. Appropriate acknowledgement has been provided to all images. To the best of our knowledge, all images are being used in compliance with the Fair Use Policy; if there are omissions or inaccuracies, please inform us so that any necessary corrections can be made. [resources@wjec.co.uk](mailto:resources@wjec.co.uk)