In Space, No One Can Hear You Scream ‘Authorship!’

*The Shift of Authorship in the Alien Franchise from the Producer to the Director to the Star*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Erlingur Grétar Einarsson

Maí 2011
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Abstract

This thesis discusses the issue of authorship in the Alien film franchise. An attempt is made to dissect how the films are influenced by the producers of the franchise, the directors of each film and the star playing the main role in them. The main issue is how authorship shifts from one agent to another between installments.

The first part of the thesis is an analysis of each of the four directors who have directed an Alien film, Ridley Scott, James Cameron, David Fincher and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, and how their specific tendencies formed each Alien film to fit their own directorial vision as much as conforming their installment to a genre or a previous entry. All four directors had considerable influence on both the style and story of their respective films, but while the first two, Scott and Cameron, are considered “authors” of their respective installments, the second two are not. The reasons for that are argued in the second and third part.

The second part of the thesis discusses Sigourney Weaver and her stardom, which plays an important part in the shifting authorship of the Alien franchise. Her career and the evolution of her celebrity over the 18 years between the first Alien installment and the last is discussed and analyzed. She evolved from being a newcomer to a prominent film star while regularly returning to the same character.

The third part discusses the perception and reception of each Alien installment by analyzing reviews and promotional material for the films. This approach brings the shift of authorship over the Alien films from the producers to the directors to the star into clear light.
Index

Introduction.................................................. 1

Film franchises and directorial authorship in the *Alien* franchise ............. 5

Ridley Scott and *Alien* ........................................ 6

James Cameron and *Aliens* ...................................... 10

David Fincher and *Alien 3* ....................................... 15

Jean-Pierre Jeunet and *Alien: Resurrection* .......................... 18

Sigourney Weaver’s stardom ....................................... 22

The perception of authorship ................................... 29

The perception of authorship in *Alien* ............................ 29

The perception of authorship in *Aliens* ........................... 32

The perception of authorship in *Alien 3* .......................... 34

The perception of authorship in *Alien: Resurrection* .................. 36

Conclusion................................................................... 38

References.................................................................. 40
Introduction

[Sigourney:] „Fincher was obviously very young but keen to tackle that enormous responsibility. The directors have always been the stars of each movie really. And until we found the right genius, the Alien 3 project never felt set. Only when Fincher appeared did we feel we were in good hands. The first words out of his mouth were ‘Shave Ripley’s head’! I knew instantly he wasn’t going to be a quiet and undaring director. (Jones, 16)

But the show quite rightly belongs to Sigourney Weaver, and her shaven headed presence – arrived at due to the prevalence of space lice – ensures that the quality of the film is never in question, and interest in it is always high. (Brett, 26)

Who is the real and definitive author of any modern film? The authorship of film has been a complex subject both inside and outside the academy for decades. Auteur theory, genre theory and star studies all offer a distinct viewpoint on the subject of what really controls the ultimate result of any film production. But a definitive answer to this question has never been found, for even the meaning of the word “auteur” has never been fully defined or explained. When it comes to modern American filmmaking, the issue becomes trickier still. Directors, producers, stars, even cinematographers, editors or composers, can lay claim to authorship over the final result of almost any film, and academics, professional film critics and journalists, as well as the every-day viewer, every one of them interested in determining the “real” author of the film they just saw,
can, have and will easily become lost in the labyrinth of authorship in modern Hollywood.

The two opening quotes are taken from the same issue of *Film Review*, the monthly British film magazine. The first is from Alan Jones’s interview with Sigourney Weaver, the main actress of the then newly released *Alien 3* (1992), directed by David Fincher. The second is taken from Anwar Brett’s review of the same film. In these two quotes there is an obvious clash in the reading of one of the most talked-about elements of that film - the shaved head of Ellen Ripley, the main character in the *Alien* film franchise. Weaver herself attributes this decision to the director, while the reviewer, only ten pages later in the very same issue, gives Weaver all the credit for her “shaven headed presence”. Why – and how – does this come about? Why is the power of authorship attributed to the main actress instead of the director, a man who has been called an “auteur” by film scholars, or even the producers of this successful science-fiction franchise? The *Alien* film franchise is a perfect example of how authorship is not only read in different ways, but also how it shifts from one agent of authorship to another through several installments.

The first film about Ellen Ripley and her encounters with the now famous, near-unstoppable “xenomorph” that wreaks havoc on Ripley’s spaceship, *Alien*, came out in 1979. It made its mark on film history, not least in regards to special effects, suspense and its modern blend of horror and science fiction, but more still in regards to characters that had a profound impact on its audience. The success of *Alien*, both commercial and critical, resulted in the eventual production of three direct sequels, *Aliens* (1986), *Alien 3* and *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), as well as two spin-off films combining the world of *Alien* with the world of *Predator*, a 1987 action film, another successful blend of the
monster horror and science fiction genres, *AVP: Alien vs. Predator* (2004), and *AVPR: Aliens vs. Predator – Requiem* (2007). In addition, a prequel, tentatively titled *Prometheus*, is currently in production under the direction of Ridley Scott, the director of the first *Alien* film. The first four films have achieved status as one the most popular and respected Hollywood film franchises of the last few decades, and in this essay they will be referred to as the *Alien* franchise or *Alien* series.

All four films revolve around the same central character, Ellen Ripley, played by actress Sigourney Weaver, and her repeated encounters with members of the same predatory, hostile and deadly alien race, as well as her conflict with other humans who want to capture the xenomorph for either financial or military benefits. Despite these semantic similarities between the films, they are all easily discernible from each other; the main reason for this is that each film was made by a different director; *Alien* was directed by Ridley Scott, *Aliens* was directed (and written) by James Cameron and the third film, *Alien 3*, was directed by David Fincher, while the fourth film, *Alien: Resurrection*, was directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet.

What is most remarkable about this line-up of directors is that today each and every one of them is considered among the most respected filmmakers in the world and all of them have enjoyed that status for a number of decades. Their films are easily identifiable, both in regards to narrative and visual style as well as ideology. All of them have been regarded as auteurs at various points in their career, be it by academic writers, critics or their audience. These directors’ participation in the installments of entries in a film franchise creates a unique combination of auteur filmmaking and genre films as parts of a Hollywood studio franchise.
In addition to this combination of genre film and auteur film in the *Alien* franchise, there is a third important element: Sigourney Weaver, the star. Over the course of the 18 years in which the four *Alien* films were conceived, Sigourney Weaver developed from being a newcomer to being a physical actress and later a critical favorite demanding top-billing in her films, before achieving a permanent status as a seminal star in Hollywood. Through that process she in turn gains certain level of authorship over her work, be it through the perception of those who see it or in her direct influence on its production.

What makes the *Alien* franchise so interesting in an academic context is exactly this; the development from genre film to auteur film to star vehicle over the course of its four installments. The most sufficient way to address this development is by setting a baseline; what does the ordinary film franchise installment in Hollywood look like?
Film franchises and directorial authorship in the *Alien* franchise

Hollywood is the birthplace of an immense amount of film franchises, tracing back to as early as the second decade of the 20th century. The vast majority of these franchises is most easily defined and recognizable by each one’s internal homogeneity. The most obvious example is the James Bond franchise. Currently the Bond canon consists of twenty-two official, Broccoli-produced films, with the twenty-third in active production.

The first film, *Dr. No*, released in 1962, is not only nearly semantically, but also ideologically identical to the sixteenth one, *License to Kill*, released in 1989. All sixteen films follow a near identical narrative structure, with its opening hook of an action scene, lavish animated title song performed by a major pop star, and all the way through a fill-in-the-blanks Hero’s Journey model of a script à la Christopher Vogler (1997). All sixteen films deal with the Cold War and the values of the modern western man and the violence necessary to uphold freedom from the oppressive powers of Soviet Communism. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the ideology went through only minor changes, and still today, after 22 films, revolves around the defense of the western way of life, enforced through necessary violence against whatever threatens it. The directors never strayed very far from the base model, leaving the authorship squarely in the hands of the producers, mainly Albert Broccoli and later his daughter, Barbara.

A similar authorship structure defines most other notable Hollywood franchises. The *Halloween* franchise, with ever-changing directors and a high cast turnover, is primarily classified within the horror genre. The same thing can be said about franchises like *A Nightmare on Elm Street, Scream and Saw* (horror), *Police Academy and American Pie* (comedy) or *Fast & the Furious* (action).
The *Alien* franchise breaks from that mold, not only in that each one is directed by a noted director who has, through his career, gained authorship over his work, but also that each film bears strong and unmistakable signs of its respective director. Those signs unite each single installment equally with another of its director's films, however unrelated in story or genre it is, as they link the *Alien* films together. An analysis of each director and their respective films’ auteurist signs will shed further light on how they break from the generic mold and into the realm of auteur film.

**Ridley Scott and *Alien***

In the article “Alternatives to Auteurs”, Graham Petrie notes that there “are many directors who were identified with a particular kind of film and could be trusted to carry that through efficiently, but have displayed little noticeable talent outside their chosen area” (Petrie, 117). A contrasting example is of a “Creator”, as Petrie puts it, a new classification most resembling the more classical term of “auteur”, the defining force that makes each film what it is, regardless of genre: “Fellini: since *The White Sheik* has made films on his own terms, to the extent that his name is now routinely attached to their titles” (Petrie, 116).

Similar to Fellini’s, albeit in a different context, Ridley Scott’s films are undeniably identifiable as his. He has a visual and narrative style which has followed him through three decades’ worth of filmmaking, and within a multitude of different genres. He is not a “Scene-Stealer” (Petrie, 117) or “Harmonizer” (Petrie, 117), but rather a “Creator”, since his career has taken him across several genres, as noted by Ian Haydn Smith in a critical analysis of Ridley Scott’s career, in *Contemporary British and Irish Film Directors*. There he states that “Scott has created a vision of the past, present
and, most dramatically, the future, that has influenced a whole generation of filmmakers” (Smith, 305).

The generic Hollywood-produced horror/science fiction film revolves around the effects, the exposure of the monster and the shocks, and those do certainly feature in *Alien*. However, where the generic tradition assigns the “emphasis on physical confrontation and threat that occur within a context marked by those trappings we associate with science fiction,” (Telotte, 5), i.e. a monster killing off humans (horror) inside a mining ship in deep space (science fiction), Scott’s influence on the film rather emphasizes very long conversations between the characters. *Alien* is not the only Ridley Scott film containing extended conversations between characters either waiting for something to happen or reacting to a recent dramatic event. *Blade Runner* (1982), another film set within the science fiction genre, contains only a few minutes’ worth of violent action along with intermittent expository shots of a future, decayed Los Angeles, while Rick Deckard’s conversation with an android unaware of its real nature is over ten minutes long alone. A common occurrence in Scott’s films, namely this emphasis on calmly exposing the characters’ emotions and motives through conversation rather than action, is most obvious in his more effects-laden films, such as *Alien, Blade Runner, Gladiator* (2000) and *Black Hawk Down* (2001), while other films, such as *Matchstick Men* (2003), *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *A Good Year* (2006), are primarily driven by characters and conversations in a contemporary context.

There is ample evidence of this emphasis in *Alien*. One is the conversation between Parker and Brett in the engine room of the Nostromo, where they are more worried about their share of the cargo’s revenue than the imminent and very physical danger. Another is the famous “chest-burster” scene, where Kane’s ribcage gets
dramatically rearranged by the violent birth of an alien child gestating inside him. The violent part of this scene is only about five seconds long, whereas the intense conversation highlighting the crew’s confusion in its current circumstances is several minutes long. Previously, another violent scene inside the alien spaceship takes place, where a so-called “facehugger” springs out from a newly opened egg and latches onto Kane’s face. The violent attack takes up only a single second of the film, while the next ten minutes are dedicated to Kane lying unconscious on the operating table inside Nostromo and the conversations between members of the crew, their attempts to research or remove the creature, still attached to his face, without ever taking any physical action. The cerebral is weighed more heavily against the physical throughout Scott’s career in terms of narrative duration or frequency.

In *Gladiator*, the central character of Maximus is much rather remembered for his final speech, his tactical cunning, or brotherly bond with fellow gladiators than for his physical prowess in the battles he takes part in, either as a soldier or a slave, even though there is no lack of the latter. Even in a film like *G.I. Jane* (1997), which “bears close resemblance to Tony Scott’s work for ‘high concept’ producers, Jerry Bruckheimer and Don Simpson,” (Smith, 307) the main obstacles for the central character, a female soldier’s rise to the Marine Corps, are social and political rather than physical, played out through conversation and emotional exposition. Even the incessant gunfire and din of explosions during the entire two hours of *Black Hawk Down* can’t overshadow the primary emphasis of the narrative, namely on the relationships between the entrapped soldiers in a foreign environment.
Critics of auteurism may point to the multitude of influences that affect the final outcome of a film. The creative decisions are so many and varied that it invites a number of questions to the real authorship of a film:

'Personal vision’ made it unnecessary to pay much attention to such minor matters as: Who instigated the project, and for what motives? Who actually wrote the script?, and how much of it survives? Who cast the film, and for what reasons? Who edited the final product, and under whose directives? (Petrie, 110)

Rather than being deterred by such argumentation, V.F. Perkins states that, besides having an advisory function, the director’s “other most vital responsibility is that of co-ordination. Directors are needed precisely because film-making involves so many and such varied kinds of creative decision” (Perkins, 72). One way for directors, especially those with creative power to form a recurring signature on their films is to regularly surround themselves with the same collaborators. Some of the people who regularly work or worked with Ridley Scott collaborated with him on the production of Alien. Examples are composer Jerry Goldsmith, who also scored Legend (1985) and Kingdom of Heaven (2005), and editor Terry Rawlings, who also edited Blade Runner and Legend.

Ridley Scott’s auteurist signatures abound in Alien. The change of director for the sequel, Aliens, would not merely bring that fact into clear light, but also show how differently the next director in the queue approached this same subject matter.
James Cameron and *Aliens*

Most James Cameron films concern themselves with the apocalyptic or catastrophic. Because the apocalypse/disaster film has become somewhat synonymous with the term “Hollywood blockbuster”, some might object to describing James Cameron as an auteur since his films have become exemplary of popular contemporary Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking, made with the collective effort of hundreds of contributors and apparently conforming both semantically and ideologically to the norm of filmmaking in Hollywood. However, Cameron presents an intriguing case of the hen or the egg. In his article, “Films, Directors and Critics”, his namesake Ian Cameron says “[e]veryone accepts the cinema of directors for France, Italy, Japan, India, Argentina, Sweden and Poland … It is only over American movies that the trouble starts, and reviews are likely to end with a desultory ‘George Cukor directed efficiently’” (31).

Because Hollywood and American filmmaking are overtly market-driven, as evidenced by the immense interest in the economics of the films made, their budget, the stars’ salaries, the dissection of the publicity campaigns and the sheer number of media outlets and websites primarily - and often solely - interested in the box office income of any given film, the tendency is that the creative aspect of American filmmaking does not matter at all. While it is true that James Cameron’s films exemplify many of the ways today’s blockbuster films are made up, there is just as strong a case for arguing that Cameron is not a follower of the current trends in Hollywood, but in fact a leader and pioneer. Contemporary American films are, among other things, known for concise conversations and one-liners, where characters relay information or emotion in short, even clichéd form, and often unrealistically fitting to their situation. While James Cameron will never be accused of breaking this tradition, the fact remains that he has
not merely followed this easy-to-market form of scripted conversations and one-liners, but in fact he is responsible for many of the most famous and most imitated movie lines in history. *The Terminator’s* (1984) repeated promises of “I’ll be back” or humorous send-offs like “Hasta la vista, baby” in the sequel, *The Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), are among them, as is Leonardo DiCaprio’s euphoric scream, “I’m the king of the world!” in *Titanic* (1997). Cameron writes almost all of his own films’ scripts, so the question of his authorship of these iconic moments in film history is hardly debated.

*Aliens*, his second full-length film as director¹, is no exception, with its very direct and bluntly expressive characters as Jenette Goldstein’s butch Pvt. Vasquez and Bill Paxton’s cocky Pvt. Hudson aptly display in several short exchanges throughout the film, akin to the following:

Hudson: Have you ever been mistaken for a man?

Vasquez: No. Have you?

A recurrent stylistic feature of Cameron’s, a progressive increase in narrative tempo was already apparent in his first film, *The Terminator*. While the first halves of his films, most of which are well over 130 minutes long, gradually build up the narrative and emotional tension between the characters and set up the complex grid of plot devices and narrative information, the second halves unleash a barrage of mammoth-sized set pieces, each bigger than the previous. He doesn’t hesitate to kill off a large majority of the characters, especially those he has diligently worked up audience empathy for. This happens in both *Terminator* films, *The Abyss* (1989), *Avatar* (2009)

¹ Before *Aliens* and *The Terminator*, he was credited as the director of *Piranha II: The Spawning* (1981), but as Alexandra Keller notes in her analysis of Cameron’s work in *Fifty Contemporary Film Directors*, he was fired from the project after twelve days, and considers *The Terminator* his directorial debut himself (Keller, 80).
and, somewhat inevitably, in Titanic. Aliens is no exception in this case, where the only survivors at the end, out of an initial principal cast of over fifteen characters, are Ripley and the child found on LV-426, Newt.²

The scale of Aliens is considerably bigger than its predecessor’s. There are more settings in Aliens, the cast of characters is bigger, the explosions and rate of gunfire are both larger and more frequent and, most notably, the aliens themselves have grown not only in number but in size as well. In Aliens, the alien queen revealed in the film’s climax was fittingly designed by Cameron himself, not H.R. Giger, the xenomorph’s original creator.

Cameron, like Ridley Scott, employed many regular coworkers to collaborate on Aliens. Beside Sigourney Weaver, who again worked for Cameron in Avatar, actors Lance Henriksen, Bill Paxton and Michael Biehn all played pivotal roles in other Cameron films, The Terminator, True Lies (1994) and The Abyss. Composer James Horner also scored Titanic and Avatar. Production designer Peter Lamont again worked for Cameron on Titanic and True Lies. Out of all four Alien franchise directors, Cameron had the largest number of regular collaborators working with him on Aliens.

Besides the stylistic tendencies shown by Cameron in Aliens, linking it with his former and later films, the world vision displayed in Aliens has many similarities with his other projects, even more so than with the other Alien franchise films. An important factor is that Cameron himself wrote the script for Aliens, something no other Alien director did, at least officially.³

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² At the start of Alien 3, Newt had been killed by the xenomorph in hypersleep, although that was the decision of another director, David Fincher.
³ Reports of Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s heavy rewrites of Joss Whedon’s script for Alien: Resurrection surfaced during production, which are further discussed in the chapter on Jeunet’s work on Alien: Resurrection on page 19.
As previously stated, Cameron’s films often concern themselves with the apocalyptic. In *The Terminator* a bio-mechanical robot is sent from the future to prevent an apocalyptic war between men and machines, all but eradicating the human race. In *True Lies* an assassin must prevent nefarious terrorists from detonating a nuclear bomb in the United States. In *Avatar*, a marine switches sides to prevent humans from erasing an entire peaceful alien civilization in order to strip-mine their natural resources. Even *Titanic* is a microcosm in itself, a cross-section of society, with its class division, fallible leadership and forbidden romance, while heading for a tragic downfall. In *Aliens* Ellen Ripley must, while saving her own skin, prevent the self-serving plans of a corporate agent to capture the aliens and bring them to Earth⁴, thereby setting mankind’s home planet up for annihilation. Although this threat, combined with the theme of corporate greed is featured in all the *Alien* films, it is nowhere as central as in *Aliens*.

Furthermore, as Alexandra Keller accurately describes in her analysis of Cameron’s work, James Cameron’s films display his “fascination with violence, technology, strong women, money, and the nexus of representation and history” (Keller, 80) and, even more invariably, a “preoccupation with vision” (80):

> [I]n *The Terminator*, it is the cyborg’s field of vision, in *Aliens* it is also the vision of the aliens themselves. In *The Abyss* the non-terrestrial intelligent life forms show the humans a ‘movie’ in order to show them reality. *True Lies* constantly deploys surveillance equipment… and *Titanic* shows us the eponymous ship early on via cameras in remote operated underwater vehicles. In *Avatar* human vision is completely relocated into another species as the human characters, in a deep sleep, experience the world through their Na’vi avatars. (Keller, 80)

⁴ Due to their unique physical and biological functions, the aliens and their physiology are thought to be viable as weapons.
This is not merely a stylistic flair, for when it coincides with Cameron’s previously mentioned recurrent stylistic themes it produces an ideological conclusion. This conclusion is perhaps most easily arrived at by examining a film Cameron didn’t direct. He wrote the script for Strange Days (1995), directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Strange Days revolves around the illegal obtaining and selling of other people’s sensory-visual experiences, relayed directly into the subject’s brain via cutting-edge technology. The result is “a kind of hyped-up virtual reality” (Keller, 85), which has a much more profound meaning than as a simple meta-fictional or aesthetic device, “reminding us… that we are… engaged in the act of watching a movie” (Keller, 85). Consequently, it reveals a certain Baudrillardian truth about the state of the world; namely that we, the audience, fill the cinemas to experience a mediated vision of the world which comes much closer to presenting the desired representation of the world than the world itself can ever represent.⁵ As if to drive this very point home, Keller quotes Time magazine technology writer Joshua Quinter, upon having seen Avatar: “I had the peculiar sensation of wanting to return there, as if Pandora were real” (Keller, 87).

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⁵ Jean Baudrillard’s benchmark work on hyper-reality, Simulation and Simulacra, revolves around this disconnection between the signs of reality and reality itself.
David Fincher and Alien 3

An analysis of David Fincher’s work and influence on Alien 3 has to begin with an explanation. The production of Alien 3 was very troubled – so troubled, in fact, that even the studio itself does not bother concealing it. It concedes that not merely the final product, but the filming period itself was not the vision David Fincher wanted for Alien 3 (“Alien Quadrilogy”, 14), since for a director’s cut to exist, he would “have to be allowed to remake the film from scratch with complete creative control,” (“Alien Quadrilogy”, 14) thereby confirming he didn’t. There does exist an assembly cut of the film, released in the 2003 Alien Quadrilogy box set, which is more unlike its original edition than any of the other three films’ director’s cuts or special editions. However, to remain faithful to the analysis of the other films, based on their original theatrical releases, this analysis is based on the theatrical release version of Alien 3. Even then, Fincher’s auteurist signs abound. Fincher’s stylistic tendencies partly hark back to his early career as director of music videos, most apparent in the editing pace, which is considerably quicker than Scott’s or Cameron’s.

The world of Alien 3 is visually quite different from Alien and Aliens. Beside the change in setting, from LV-426 to another remote planet, the prison colony Fiorina 161, the surroundings change both in texture and color. While Scott’s run-down mining ship in Alien and Cameron’s decimated settler’s base in Aliens share the feeling of neglect and destruction with the prison in Fincher’s film, the surroundings are considerably dirtier in Alien 3, a trait shared more by the basements and abandoned houses of Fight

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6 In the sleeve album accompanying the special edition/assembly cut of Alien 3 in the 2003 Alien Quadrilogy box set, containing all four films, the introduction begins with, “Following its troubled production and controversial release, ALIEN 3 [sic] slowly became something of a curiosity among serious enthusiasts of the ALIEN [sic] series.” Such straight-forward acknowledgement of derogatory rumors following a film’s production, in studio-released copy, no less, must be extremely rare in modern filmmaking.
Club (1999), crime scenes of Seven (1995) and streets of Zodiac (2007) than its Alien counterparts. Another noticeable change is that Scott’s grey and Cameron’s vaguely blue hue has given way to a sepia-filtered world, a recurrent look of Fincher’s cinematic work (The Game (1997), Seven, Fight Club and Zodiac being the most obvious examples). This he combines with stylized cinematography and framing, high frequency of tracking shots and rapid-paced editing.

Fincher’s visual preferences are not his only apparent trait in Alien 3. A combination of the visual and narrative is the composition and appearance of his main characters, crystallized in Alien 3. The overt masculinity is, curiously enough, most notable in Fincher’s female characters. Jodie Foster brings a classically manlike fierceness to the entrapped Meg Altman in Panic Room (2002), Cate Blanchett’s traditionally feminine face is made more masculine as Benjamin Button’s (2008) Daisy and, most obviously, Sigourney Weaver’s Ellen Ripley gets her head shaved in Alien 3. This was, according to Weaver herself, Fincher’s very first request while making Alien 3: “The first words out of his mouth were ‘Shave Ripley’s head!’” (Jones, 16). In tune with the gritty surroundings they reside in, the characters are frequently violent and overly masculine (and in the case of Alien 3, genetically so), and conversations are purposefully crude and devoid of subtlety, all combining to create a violent, ruthless world where law, society and civilization is either the enemy or absent altogether.

In Fincher’s Fight Club an office worker forms an underground bare-knuckle boxing club as an answer to his meaningless existence within the accepted society, a club whose operation escalates to the point of a subversive terrorist organization. In The Game, a wealthy executive who has alienated himself from family and friends gets the harsh realities of society violently thrust upon him via an elaborate birthday present, so
violently that he is ready to commit suicide at the end of the film. In *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, a man who ages backwards is forced to observe society as an outsider, physically and socially alienated from it. The extreme is found in *Alien 3*, where civilization is absent altogether and when it finally arrives, with its apathetic greed, it triggers the suicide of the main character, Ellen Ripley.

Weaver herself makes perhaps the most accurate connotation of Fincher’s accumulation of dramatic signs when she says “[f]or a long time in *Alien 3*, she’s the Alien herself – despised, feared and outcast” (Jones, 17). *Alien 3* is by no means the sole example from Fincher’s career. Just like Ripley takes over the role of the “monster” threatening the delicate balance of a society of rapists and murderers of women, a role actualized in her own ultimate alien pregnancy, Nicholas Van Orton is alienated from society in *The Game*, Jack’s own hidden rebel personality in *Fight Club* expels him from normality by way of a violent explosion, thereby alienating him from society, Brad Pitt’s *Benjamin Button* tries his best to imitate a human but never succeeds, and Kevin Spacey’s John Doe in *Seven* is a monster in human form, ripping violently through the apathetic society he will never belong to.

Abandonment and apathy are also recurrent themes in Fincher’s work, as David Orgeron observes in his analysis: “The Kubrickian notion of man alone in the universe he’s created for himself is a theme Fincher’s films return to repeatedly” (Orgeron, 171). Additionally, the masculinity so abundant in his characters is far from glorified, as when Orgeron employs the shelter in *Panic Room* as a “metaphor for a machine-like male ‘logic’… But the room, like Fincher’s men, fails, becoming a trap…” (Orgeron, 172). Family abandonment, mainly on the part of the father, is ever-present in Fincher’s films, as a vast majority of his characters are either fatherless, divorced or simply fed up with
male apathy as “Fight Club’s reduction of the male predicament to ‘a generation of men raised by women’” (Orgeron (174) bluntly portrays.

Even an imperfect, heavily moderated and re-edited Alien 3 displays “remnants of what have come to be Fincher’s central themes” (Orgeron, 176), or rather a prototypical product of these same themes, since Alien 3 is his first full-length film. An important shift is also apparent in Alien 3 from its predecessors, via Fincher’s recurrent themes. Where the first two films centered on the alien itself and Ripley’s conflict with it, Alien 3 places Ripley squarely as the centre of attention, going as far as impregnating her with an alien fetus. This focus shift would become more dramatically obvious in the fourth film, Alien: Resurrection.

Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Alien: Resurrection

The direction taken in Alien 3 to increasingly centralize Ellen Ripley as the real subject of the narrative was taken to its extremes in Alien: Resurrection, directed by French filmmaker Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Before being hired to direct the fourth installment in the Alien franchise he had garnered international recognition for his two previous films, Delicatessen (1991) and City of Lost Children (La Cité des enfants perdus) (1995).⁷ Delicatessen was released in at least twelve countries and City of Lost Children in no less than twenty-two.⁸ Consequently, Jeunet had the most experience with full-length films out of all four Alien series directors.

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⁷ Jeunet shared co-director credit with Marc Caro for both films, although Caro was mainly in charge of “the visual and the design production” (Lanzoni, 365), while Jeunet directed.
⁸ According to Internet Movie Database Pro’s release info. As a user-contribution web source, the validity of its information must be taken with a grain of salt. However, the site’s release info is considered fairly accurate and shows at least the minimum number of countries a film has been released in.
Jeunet entered the project at a point when it was well into pre-production as the producers’ first choice for directing the film, Danny Boyle, turned their offer down (Hastings, 38), and as a result a script by Joss Whedon was already in place. Weaver was now an active producer, heavily involved in the decision-making process, as she herself notes when she recalls personally approaching Boyle to direct (Hastings, 38). However, that does not mean that Jeunet’s influence was lost on the final result:

Despite Weaver’s immense importance to the production, Jeunet has also made his mark. He worked closely with cinematographer Darius Khondji (who shot both of Jeunet’s French features, as well as David Fincher’s Seven, Stealing Beauty and Evita) and the script went through several changes, often being ‘rewritten’ in storyboard form only. (Hastings, 38-39)

The reported rewriting of the script in storyboard form was not a new approach to Jeunet, either, as Rémi Fournier Lanzoni notes in French Cinema that he and Marc Caro had been using storyboards as a primary method for scripting their films since the early 1980’s (Lanzoni, 365). Despite having to learn English while the film was being shot (Hastings, 34), Jeunet made his mark on the film. For example, in addition to cinematographer Khondji (a collaborator on his first two films) and editor Herve Schneid (the editor of all of Jeunet’s films), he brought actors Ron Perlman, the lead actor from City of Lost Children, and Dominique Pinon, who has appeared in no less than six of Jeunet’s films since 1991, to the project. As to Jeunet’s influence on the final product, the visual impact is most apparent.

Firstly, “Jeunet’s trademark brown-hued locations” (Caro, 17) are overtly reminiscent of both Delicatessen and City of Lost Children. Similar to his first two films, the cinematography repeatedly makes use of wide angles, long shots and
telephoto lenses that distort and bend the outer edges of the frame very slightly due to their deep focal point (Corrigan & White, 525). These effects make the long hallways of the ship in Alien: Resurrection appear even longer. This technique, along with repeated tilted shots, making characters disproportionate in size according to their surroundings, a prominent feature throughout Jeunet’s films, is combined with a techno-gothic setting, a dark, maze-like military spaceship with its long and winding hallways, high ceilings and a decayed majesty. The visual result can easily be described as “eerie grandeur” (Lanzoni, 370), a term used for City of Lost Children’s design.

When directing attention to the narrative, further directorial similarities with Jeunet’s other films, especially his first two, become obvious. In City of Lost Children, “six genetically engineered clones” (Lanzoni, 370) feature at an important junction in the plot, while in Alien: Resurrection it is Ellen Ripley herself who is the eighth clone of her own DNA, salvaged from her scarce bodily remains after her own suicide in Alien 3. Her own encounter with the previous seven attempts at recreating her in original form, kept alive in great agony, are reminiscent not only of the gothic and “nightmarish atmosphere” (Lanzoni, 366) of Jeunet’s previous work but also of the recurrent theme of evil scientists conducting selfish plans with no regard for the lives of others, a theme also prominent in City of Lost Children, where the villain is a “prematurely aging scientist… who… has invented a device to steal children’s dreams.” (Lanzoni, 369) As if to emphasize that very point, the first words uttered in the film are via voice-over from Ripley, “My mommy always said there were no monsters. No real ones. But there are.” This line is delivered over a shot of her cloned body growing in the scientists’ lab, which then cuts to the scientists themselves, thereby placing the humans in the narrative position of the monster. Their objective is extracting an alien from her
body, and Ripley is allowed to live solely due to Dr. Gediman’s perverse pride in his achievement, and an interest in seeing her development.

As Ripley was pregnant with a xenomorph at the time of her death, her cloned DNA is now blended with the alien’s. The result is that now she has superhuman strength and acid blood that can melt through steel. In *Alien 3* she was socially alienated and isolated from her peers, but in *Alien: Resurrection* that alienation has been taken to an extreme physical level, where she is not even technically *human* anymore. Her empathy is placed rather with the xenomorphs than with the human villains.

Her physique is also altered from previous films. In *Alien: Resurrection* her muscles are considerably more toned and her make-up even altered to make her cheek- and jawbones more reminiscent of the alien itself. The conspicuous absence of the xenomorph for long stretches of the film only serves to reinforce Ripley and her journey as the focal point of the film, making her journey of discovery of a tragic, dark and self-serving world similar to the journey of Ron Perlman’s One in *City of Lost Children* than her own previous battles of wits (*Alien*) or muscle (*Aliens*) with the alien.

It is this very centralization of the character of Ripley and evolving stardom of Sigourney Weaver that prevents the *Alien* films from being perceived simply as their director’s creation; under their sole authorship. Her stardom, emerging and developing over the 18 years of revisiting the character of Ellen Ripley, certainly plays an important part in the evolution of the *Alien* franchise.
Sigourney Weaver’s stardom

The question of whether female action heroes such as Sigourney Weaver’s Ripley in *Alien* (1979) and its sequels or Linda Hamilton’s Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* are progressive representations of women or merely contain them within a masculine sensibility has been a matter of considerable discourse. (Grant, 282)

Sigourney Weaver is not a traditional female star. The generic variety of her films makes it very difficult to pigeonhole her as a definitive “type” of actress or assign a certain preconception of the film based on Weaver’s casting alone, unlike many previous female stars, where, for example, “[t]he vehicle might provide a character of the type associated with the star (e.g. Monroe’s ‘dumb blonde’ roles, Garbo’s melancholic romantic roles)” (Dyer, 62). Additionally, there arises a problem akin to Dyer’s criticism of O.E. Klapp’s broad classification of “The Independent Woman” as a female type, which one might be tempted to place Weaver in, due to her repeated casting as a single woman, independent from male support, often straying from social norms, as in the *Alien* films, where she continually battles male corporatism, or in *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988), where she leaves society altogether to research gorillas.

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9 Traditional readings of female stardom also fail to fully explain the nature of Weaver’s film career, and as Andrew Britton accurately observes in his article, “Stars and Genre”, it is problematic to set forth a “proposition that ‘a set of star vehicles’ is in any way ‘like a genre’ (Britton 198). He goes on to explain his statement by taking Greta Garbo and her recurrent casting into roles following “the ‘Anna Karenina’ structure” (Britton, 198-9) and reveals how the structure is independent of Garbo, however often she gets offered, and accepts, roles in that mold.
There is a second order of problems with the distinction, and that is how the superfemale or superwoman actually embodies a radical alternative/opposition to prevalent female types. The ‘superfemale’ seems inevitably to be shown as demonic in her actions, and it is hard to distinguish her too firmly from other ‘strong’, ‘magnetic’ types such as the ‘bitch’ (Davis), the *femme fatale* and the intellectual/aristocratic type (Hepburn).” (Dyer, 54-5)

In fact, Weaver has played both the intellectual type (*Gorillas in the Mist*) and the ‘bitch’ (*Alien* franchise). For example, comparing her image to Jane Fonda’s career as a strong female star who went through a major transformation through the years falls flat, especially as Fonda’s biggest vehicles “emphasized sex” (Dyer, 73) above other features. In order to fully explain Weaver’s development as a star one could turn to traditionally male types such as Klapp’s “Tough Guy”, where her most recognizable character, namely *Alien*’s Ripley, portrays “violence, aggressivity, callousness and brutality,” and “presses the antisocial into the service of the social and vice versa” (Dyer, 49), but since that distinction only applies to a limited part of her on-screen characters it also proves unfulfilling as an analysis.

However, in order to attain a satisfactory reading on Weaver’s evolution as a star, one can turn to an analysis more independent of gender and more fitting to the modern film star than the above theories have to offer. In “Tom Cruise: The Construction of a Contemporary Film Celebrity”, P. David Marshall dissects what it is that makes and molds a modern film star and how their career develops over certain stages. As a running example he uses Tom Cruise, who has a career almost as long as Sigourney Weaver’s, starting in 1981. Comparing the two, using Marshall’s model, provides some interesting results.
As a budding star in the early stages of his career, Cruise attained a status which Marshall coins as “a physical performer: what is identified by industry and audience are the physical characteristic that make him or her unique in the field of film performers” (Marshall, 95). Additionally, those very same defining physical features often become a part of their on-screen persona’s character. “In these earliest incarnations, Cruise possesses a character type that is closely aligned with his own physical look” (Marshall, 97).

Similarly, Weaver’s own commanding physicality, her strong body, defined face and her assertive, yet unmistakably female, aggression becomes a part of her first notable on-screen persona, Ellen Ripley in Alien. Weaver instantly becomes classified as a physical character type, and just as that association was used for Cruise to market his next films after Taps (1981), her “feminist grit” (Schwarzbaum, “Alien: The Director’s Cut”) would be associated with not only Ripley, but her next few on-screen characters. Her next film was 1981’s Eyewitness, where her androgynously named Tony Sokolow was “not only a TV newswoman, but also a part-time serious pianist and the unhappy daughter of her domineering parents” (Ebert, “Eyewitness”), reinforcing the image of Weaver’s on-screen persona as a modern woman who can and will multitask in her life.

Similarly, her third major role, Jill Bryant in The Year of Living Dangerously (1982), lets her keep her striking, thick black hair while portraying a British envoy in Vietnam who has an unsuccessful affair with the film’s hero, played by another upcoming star, Mel Gibson. Through her physicality, she became an embodiment of “what men can do, women can do better”. This would be crystallized in her second embodiment of Ripley in Aliens. James Cameron strapped guns onto her, where she
became an action figure of a mother, culminating in her mom-on-mom showdown with the alien queen, wielding a flame thrower against the xenomorph and her eggs while rescuing a 10-year-old-girl.

However, just as Cruise’s public profile became so big that his own name started overshadowing the names of his characters, Weaver’s celebrity soon evolved beyond her mere physical definitions. For Cruise, this process begins around the release of *Risky Business* (1983), where “Cruise generates a great number of newspaper and magazine articles, not about the film, but about the star,” (Marshall, 100). He becomes what Marshall calls “a picture personality”. For Weaver, a very similar development began around the release of *Aliens*, when she would be interviewed extensively by magazines ranging from *Time Magazine* to *Starlog* to *Playboy*. In these interviews, just as much emphasis was put on Weaver’s own personality as a strong, independent woman, a contemporary hero for a new generation of modern, non-traditional young people, especially women, as there was on her role as Ellen Ripley, incidentally a strong, independent woman, a contemporary hero for a new generation of modern, non-traditional young audience.

Her on-screen independence culminated in *Gorillas in the Mist*, where she played real-life researcher Dian Fossey, who went to Africa to study mountain gorillas, live with them and later fight to protect them. In this instance, Weaver’s own persona as an independent woman not only outshone her role as an independent woman, but also another real independent woman who had actually done what Weaver was portraying in a film. Weaver was portrayed as a fighter for both women’s and nature’s rights, reinforcing her on-screen performances. She had, by this point, become “a picture
personality”, where her off-screen persona was just as strong as her on-screen characters.

Many contemporary performers get stuck in roles defined by their physical presence or features, where they are repeatedly “typecast, or arrested in the formation of celebrity status and cast in roles based only on some clear-cut stereotypical image/quality,” (Marshall, 96) and Weaver could easily enough have gotten “trapped” in the role of re-creating variations of Ripley throughout her career. She is not nearly as prominent a figure in popular media as Cruise, and the public has never been as informed about the life story of Weaver as many other contemporary stars, resulting in a lesser knowledge of her off-screen persona being significantly different from her on-screen personas.

However, just as Tom Cruise, Marshall’s prototypical example for his theory, Weaver starts “transgressing” against the type she is conceived to be (Marshall, 105). On the screen, Cruise starts portraying characters against “type” and surrounding himself with other respected and “serious” actors, such as Paul Newman in The Color of Money (1986) or Dustin Hoffman in Rain Man (1988) (Marshall, 111). The success of this transgression then enables Cruise to gain an “autonomous power” (Marshall, 113) as a critical as well as commercial star, holding his own against other well-known, even awarded actors. In a very similar fashion, Weaver started transgressing against her on-screen type before she became too heavily typecast. Examples of this can be found as early as 1984, when she played Dana Barrett in Ghost Busters (1984), a sci-fi comedy, where she plays a purely comic role, a helpless woman possessed by a demonic spirit while being courted by two hapless men.
Another sign of transgression against type is an evolving star’s casting opposite proven film stars, in order to affirm them as a versatile and autonomous carrier of star vehicles, regardless of genre or character type. The first signs of this development in her career were Aliens, where she held her own against proven actor Lance Henriksen, playing the android Bishop, and 1986’s Half Moon Street, where she played a scholar moonlighting at an escort service, opposite Michael Caine. Weaver was next cast alongside superstars Harrison Ford and Melanie Griffith in Working Girl (1988), where she played a devious and selfish boss. Additionally, Weaver received a total of three Academy Award nominations over the course of only two years, for Aliens, Gorillas in the Mist and Working Girl, further strengthening her status as an autonomous film star.

By the time Alien 3 was released, Weaver was well on her way towards proving that she was an autonomous star, and a third, and somewhat different, approach to her most famous character would reinforce that sensation. Contrastingly to her shaved head and an even more masculine performance than before Ripley would, for the first time in the franchise, become involved in a (failed) romance, with the prison’s physician, played by Charles Dance. When Alien: Resurrection came out five years later, she had confirmed her status as an autonomous, genre-crossing star with films such as the historical epic 1492: Conquest of Paradise (1992), drama thriller Death and the Maiden (1994), comedy Dave (1993) and action thriller Copycat (1995).

When a modern film star gains this sort of autonomous power over their career, their claim to authorship becomes stronger. Actors or actresses in this position often become producers, even if only by title, if not by funding. Their name gets attached to their films’ promotional material and those who receive the product, critics and audiences, start assigning authorship of the film to the star, rather than anyone else
responsible for its production. Therefore, this evolution of Weaver’s career and celebrity reveals an interesting factor in her portrayal of Ellen Ripley. She has played the same character at very different stages in her career. The Ellen Ripley of Alien was portrayed by a physical performer, the Ellen Ripley of Aliens marked the transformation of her actor into a picture personality, the Ellen Ripley of Alien 3 was played by a transgressor developing into a fully autonomous star, and the Ellen Ripley of Alien: Resurrection was played by an esteemed actress in full control of her own career. This raises the question how the evolution in perception of Weaver as a star affects the authorship of the Alien films.
The perception of authorship

Trying to arrive at a conclusion on the authorship of a modern American film would be an exercise in futility. One can claim, as many have, that the director should be titled the author. Others make the assumption that in today’s producer-driven American filmmaking world, the directors were “at worst, brothers-in-law; at best, bright technicians,” (Vidal, 17) and even some claim that the immense effect of the stars on their films, both in actuality and context with their celebrity, makes them the authors. Despite all these mutually exclusive notions, both scholars and the uninitiated seem to wish nothing more than to arrive at one unified field theory on the matter. This problem is manifest in the Alien franchise, where all sides seem to have some claim to authorship. With these problems at hand, the only solution seems to be how authorship is perceived, and there the case of the Alien films gets interesting. By looking at the reception of each of the four franchise installments this shift in authorship is brought into clear light.

The perception of authorship in Alien

In his 2003 review of 1979’s Alien, Roger Ebert calls it “Ridley Scott’s Alien” and praises Scott for its “cerebral” context and “intelligent” handling of a plot originated in the dark science-fiction genre, likening it with both his previous film, “the cerebral, elegant The Duelists (1977)” and his next film, which “would be another intelligent, visionary sci-fi epic, Blade Runner (1982).” (Ebert, “Alien (1979)”). This pairing of adjectives with another of the director’s otherwise unrelated projects is imperative in forming the reader’s perception of Scott as the author of Alien. He also acknowledges
its generic context and possible franchising, where he accredits the sole survival of Ripley, Sigourney Weaver’s character, to the producers, who “must have hoped for a sequel, and by killing everyone except a woman, they cast their lot with a female lead for their series” (Ebert, “Alien: (1979)”).

James Berardinelli also recognizes the film’s overt generic links, noting how “it wasn’t the first space movie to feature a homicidal monster, nor was it the first time a group of characters were hunted down one-by-one in dark, dank spaces,” (Berardinelli, “Alien”) yet also comments on how, “[a]long with 1982’s Blade Runner, Alien cemented Scott as a filmmaker of great promise and ability.” (Berardinelli, “Alien”). He even offers up two more candidates for authorship of the film, production designer Michael Seymour and creature designer H.R. Giger, praising Seymour’s “perfect playground for the creature” and Giger’s xenomorph being “one of unparalleled terror, [representing] one of the most memorable visions ever to appear in a science fiction movie.” As for Weaver, despite Berardinelli noting that her Ellen Ripley has become a benchmark for modern female action heroes, she “arguably gives the least impressive performance,” and “is essentially just one of several crew members – until the end, when she’s the last one standing,” thereby undermining her authorship over the first film.

In his review on the box-set titled Alien: Quadrilogy, containing all four films, Keith Phibbs of The A.V. Club acknowledges how, “unlike, say, the conservatively programmed James Bond series, each Alien film offers a distinct directorial vision, and each plays out as a variation on existing themes rather than a chapter in a longer saga” (Phibbs, “Alien / Aliens / Alien 3 / Alien: Resurrection”), underwriting the popular notion of the director as author. In his review on Alien, he also gives credence to Giger’s
claim to authorship, calling his creation “never-equaled” (Phibbs, “Alien”). Similarly, *Boston Globe*’s Ty Burr observes how the “emergence of both Ellen Ripley as a character and Sigourney Weaver as a star” (Burr, “Alien director’s cut oozes gore and greatness”) is conducted by Scott, who intentionally “keeps Ripley in the background for the film’s first third” to build up for her surprising star turn overshadowing the more known (at the time) Tom Skerritt.

It is important to note that these reviews are dated from 2003, around the release of *Alien: Director’s Cut*, and therefore some twenty-four years after its original release, which means that the reviewers might have been tempted to review it, after the fact, as something of a director’s vehicle above a genre film, due to Scott’s illustrious career in those 24 years. By comparison, *Variety*’s relatively short 1979 staff review mainly pigeonholes the film as a genre vehicle, pointing out its similarities with another science-fiction monster film, 1958’s *It! The Terror from Beyond Space*. The publicity material for the film tells a similar story.

The original trailers emphasized the blend of horror and science-fiction with claustrophobic shots from inside the spaceship and its paranoid crew and engaging in shadow play with the figure of the xenomorph while drawing on Tom Skerritt’s name recognition. The original posters for *Alien* were quite simple. One simply features the title with an ominous image of the alien egg, reminiscent in style and color of 50s’ horror films like *The Fly* (1958). Another poster also displays the egg while adding the tagline, “In space no one can hear you scream” below it, combining notions from science fiction and horror and invoking expectations of a generic thriller, where the selling point is the ominously dark atmosphere the poster conveys and the mash-up of

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10 It is worth mentioning that approximately seven years later, in the review for *Aliens*, *Alien* is referred to as “Ridley Scott’s 1979 sci-fi shocker” and Scott described as “having something of an artist in him” (*Variety*, “*Aliens*”).
two classical genres. In accordance to the director’s rise to stardom and authorship, the Director’s Cut offers a slight variation on the original poster, adding “Ridley Scott’s” above the title. Like the 24th anniversary version’s reviews, the publicity material is revised to harmonize with how critics and audiences have come to perceive the authorship of *Alien*, namely as a Ridley Scott film above a generic thriller, despite the original expectations. At this point, Weaver’s authorship is almost non-existent, which is hardly a surprise, given her second-billing status on the credit list, her lack of name recognition (this was her first major film role) and her lack of dominance in screen time. However, that status would soon change.

**The perception of authorship in *Aliens***

With the release of *Aliens*, Sigourney Weaver’s influence as a star was already starting to surface. Roger Ebert’s 1986 review of *Aliens* emphasizes Weaver’s presence as “the thread that holds everything together,” (Ebert, “*Aliens*”). He also acknowledges director James Cameron’s contribution as more than considerable, e.g. that he “has been assigned to make an intense and horrifying thriller, and he has delivered” and praising the film in general as “a superb example of filmmaking craft,” (Ebert, “*Aliens*”) observing the same notion of Cameron’s style as noted in the analysis on his influence on *Aliens* earlier in this thesis when he describes the film as “unremittingly intense for at least its last hour,” (Ebert, “*Aliens*”) although he doesn’t link this observation directly with Cameron.

*Variety*’s review is more direct, calling *Aliens* “James Cameron’s vault into the big time” and describing Cameron as “an expert craftsman,” while Weaver “does a
smashing job as Ripley.” *(Variety, “Aliens”), consequently, be it intentionally or not, making a clear distinction between the director’s “craft” and the actors “job”. Dave Kehr’s review in the *Chicago Reader* also emphasizes Cameron as the author, crediting him with “audaciously draw[ing] out our anticipation by alluding to past horrors and building the threat of even more extreme developments.” (Kehr, “Aliens”) James Berardinelli offers similar praise for Cameron, referring to the film as his creation, underlining the notion of him as author. In fact, his authorship is so unquestioned that it is he, not the film or the collective effort of the cast and crew, that “barely gives viewers a chance to catch their breaths or ease their grips on their armrests as he plunges his characters from one dire situation to the next.” (Berardinelli, “Aliens”). Again, it is Cameron who “pattern[’s] everything about the aliens on the kinds of behavior one might expect deep within a beehive or underneath an ant hill,” and, besides from being, in Berardinelli’s view, a superb action director, “develops a powerful, claustrophobic sense of atmosphere.” (Berardinelli, “Aliens”) Here, Cameron has claimed authorship over not only his cast, but also the creature design, the production design, lighting and even cinematography, all of which contribute to the aforementioned “atmosphere”. When the attention turns to Weaver’s performance, Berardinelli offers his opinion: “She’s every bit as imposing as a Schwarzenegger or Stallone, and seems entirely comfortable in this sort of role. In fact, Weaver is far more effective in the action sequences than in the dramatic ones,” (Berardinelli, “Aliens”) reinforcing her status as a physical performer/picture personality who has not yet fully succeeded to transgress against type.

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11 In fact, according to a documentary accompanying the film in the *Alien: Quadrilogy* box set, he designed the alien queen himself.
Nevertheless, her rise to stardom is apparent in promotional material for *Aliens*. She is ever present in the original trailers, and the posters regularly portray her in favor of the alien itself, holding the 10-year-old Newt in her arms while wielding a massive gun in the other, thereby promising a loud action film starring a known physical movie star, in lieu of the more ominous atmosphere of the first film’s posters. However, her prominence in promotional material did not, as evidenced by the above review excerpts, undermine the director’s eminent status as the perceived author of *Aliens*. That would all change with the release of *Alien 3*.

The perception of authorship in *Alien 3*

When *Alien 3* was released, the changes in authorship over the *Alien* film franchise became apparent. *Variety’s* Brian Lowry cites Sigourney Weaver, titled “star/co-producer” (Lowry, “*Alien 3*”) having spoken of a conflicting view between the producers and the studio resulting in an unfocused film. According to Lowry, Weaver is now an active agent in the forming of the film outside of her character, making her more of an author than on *Alien* or *Aliens*. He finds plenty of shortcomings in the film and divides responsibility between the scriptwriters and the director, David Fincher, marginalizing his contribution to not having “much finesse with actors in his bigscreen debut … leav[ing] Weaver to carry the load…” (Lowry, “*Alien 3*”). Somewhat similarly, James Berardinelli finds it easier to dissect authorship when finding flaws than when praising a job well done, stating that “it’s the writing and direction (by music video master David Fincher) more than the acting that lets us down.” (Berardinelli, “*Alien 3*”) He describes the film as “a mess”, the plot is “inconsistent” and the
characters are “paper-thin.” He also finds issue with an early tagline connecting the plot with Earth, while the film was still in development. “As for that tag line about screaming on Earth – our homeworld is nowhere to be found.” (Berardinelli, “Alien 3”). Finally, he proffers that “[a]s a science fiction or horror film, Alien 3 is barely passable, but, compared to its two predecessors, it’s a sorry end to the trilogy.” (Berardinelli, “Alien 3”) With this he differentiates between a generic science fiction or horror film and the previous two films, thereby reinforcing their status as something other than genre films.

*Rolling Stone*’s Peter Travers’ assignation of authorship in *Alien 3* is more definitive. While Fincher “borrows from Kubrick’s *2001* and Cameron’s *Terminator 2,*” (Travers, “*Alien 3*”) the star has become, simply put, the star. Weaver “is in spectacular form. Unarmed and nearly bald, she’s never seemed more resourcefully human. Her final scene – a war between her maternal and killer instincts – is bold and haunting.”

The interesting notion here is how it is her scene, not the film’s or the writers’ or Fincher’s. Where, in *Aliens*, the director overrides multiple authorship to become the perceived author, here it is the star, Weaver, who is assigned authorship for the collective effort of the director, the writers, the co-stars, the cinematographer and the production designer, all contributing heavily to the large-scale final scene.

It is perhaps not surprising at all that this shift in authorship is very much apparent in the publicity material. For the first time in the *Alien* franchise, *Alien 3*’s original posters are headlined by the star’s name across the top. One poster shows a drawing of the alien, not unlike posters for the previous two films, invoking memories of the first film’s dark atmosphere. However, Weaver’s name spread across the top shows that the alien is not the main attraction anymore. In addition, one of the most
frequently used taglines, “The bitch is back”, refers not to the alien, but Ripley. Another poster shows a medium shot of a shorn Weaver, conveying the notion of a character-driven star vehicle with a very noticeable change in Ripley’s physique, while another has Ripley and the alien facing off, suggesting an action thriller. While the many misleading cues in publicity material may have contributed to the confusion as to what kind of film it was, the ever-present star’s name left it very clear whose film it was.

The perception of authorship in Alien: Resurrection

Ripley is now a drastically changed person. The fusion of human and alien DNA has given her incredible physical strength, bodily fluids that can dissolve walls and a disturbing empathy with the creatures. The arrival of a gang of dodgy smugglers trading in human guinea-pigs coincides with a full-scale alien breakout. At this point Jeunet’s trademark brown-hued locations seem rather apt. (Caro, 17)

This excerpt from Jason Caro’s review of Alien: Resurrection for Film Review in January 1998 crystallizes the shift in power between star and director. He describes a number of new characteristics in Ellen Ripley, a result of a script by Joss Whedon, restructured and partly rewritten by director Jean-Pierre Jeunet, making his third full-length film, in storyboard form, and reduces Jeunet’s contribution to the “brown-hued locations.” Caro does credit Jeunet for the composition of two key scenes in the film, but his authorship is marginalized to a visual contribution. Variety’s Derek Elley gives Jeunet a little more credit, commending him for having “breathed new life into the series on several fronts” (Elley, “Alien Resurrection”), and links it with Jeunet’s other
films, like *City of Lost Children*. Still, his authority pales with Weaver’s “commanding presence in the central role” (Elley, “Alien Resurrection”).

Roger Ebert does more or less the same thing in his review. He reduces Jeunet’s influence to production design, and unfavorably to the previous films at that, while Weaver has attained such a star status that Winona Ryder, a young, upcoming actress at the time, is cast opposite her, apparently in an attempt to increase Ryder’s star worth. And when Ebert notes that Ryder “lacks the heft and presence to stand alongside Ripley,” (Ebert, “Alien Resurrection”) he confirms Weaver’s status as an autonomous star whom other stars in their respective career’s earlier stage try to measure themselves against.

Contrastingly, Washington Post’s Desson Howe notes how Jeunet “indulges his taste for dark, bizarre humor and surrealistic sets” (Howe, “Alien Resurrection: She Lives”), and stating that it is Jeunet’s vision that is assisted by his cinematographer and the special-effects team. However, this opinion is in minority among critics, and Howe is perhaps most accurate of them all when he acknowledges Weaver’s star power in stating “[s]he’s the movie’s only hope (and, not too coincidentally, one of its producers)” (Howe, “Alien Resurrection: She Lives”).

The evolution of Weaver into an autonomous star is also apparent in the film’s publicity material. As before, she is the most frequent sighting in the film’s trailers and TV spots, much more frequent than even the alien itself. What is perhaps most notable about the posters is the double-billing of her and Winona Ryder, an obvious attempt at playing Ryder’s celebrity up by aligning her with Weaver’s proven name. With *Alien: Resurrection*, Weaver has now taken over as the perceived author of the film.
Conclusion

In the discussion of authorship, the Alien film franchise offers a very interesting case. The franchise, made up from four films produced over the course of eighteen years, is a studio production, each installment financed by 20th Century Fox.Thematically, the story is a blend of the science fiction and monster horror genres, although different installments introduce different takes on these genres, where, for example, Alien is a dramatic film emphasizing the horror element, while Aliens is an action film blended with the science fiction-horror hybrid genre. Alien 3 introduces a prison drama aspect on the same theme, while Alien: Resurrection adds the imminent danger for Earth to the mix, aligning it with disaster dramas of the late 90’s.

These four films, generic in theme, are in turn directed by four different directors, who have all enjoyed illustrious and celebrated careers. All of these directors have very distinct stylistic traits and tendencies as well as repeatedly confronting the same ideological issues in their films. As the analysis on each director establishes, Scott’s, Cameron’s, Fincher’s and Jeunet’s visual, narrative and thematic recurrences are not only apparent in a multitude of each director’s respective films, they are equally apparent in their Alien franchise installment as in almost any other of their films. The visual style, narrative pacing and ideological connotation of each installment is distinctly independent of the previous installment and the reason for that is the presence and specificity of each director.

Are they therefore auteur films? Not quite. They could conceivably be classified as such, but the reality is different. Beside the decades-long argument of what an auteur or an auteur film is, especially in the market-driven American film environment, and despite the obvious influence of each director on his assignment, the question of
authorship over each *Alien* film is not easily answered. The reason is the star presence of Sigourney Weaver as the main character, Ellen Ripley. In modern Hollywood, stars can and often do wield considerable power in filmmaking, well outside their learning their lines and studying their character. They, and their agents, carefully choose films according to the direction in which they want to take their career and the type of celebrity they want to be. They even become producers, consequently having a say in the hiring of a director, co-stars and even scriptwriters.

As the analysis of Weaver’s development as star illustrates, her career has gone through different stages, and what makes this development especially arresting in context with the *Alien* franchise is that she went through these stages while regularly returning to the same character. This development is noticeable in both her actual portrayal of Ellen Ripley over the course of eighteen years and the publicity material accompanying each film, revealing how her star status changes and affects her authorship over the *Alien* film franchise. Therefore, they could be coined star vehicles, just as they can be classified as auteur films. Are the films therefore star vehicles? Not quite.

The main reason for that seems to be that the perception of reality is often stronger and clearer than the actual reality. Therefore, by researching the reception of each film, and critics’ inclination to find one unifying factor to classify films, one sees most clearly how the perception of authorship in the *Alien* series gradually shifts from a genre film in *Alien* to an auteur film in *Aliens* and ultimately to a star vehicle in *Alien 3* and *Alien: Resurrection*, completely regardless of the reality of the producers’, director’s or star’s actual power over each film.
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