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# Screening the female in the Alien franchise through a cultural and feminist lens

Gaëlle King

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Université de Bretagne Occidentale

# Screening the Female in the *Alien* Franchise

## Through a Cultural and Feminist Lens



Gaëlle King

Dissertation directed by Dr. Elizabeth Mullen

M1 Arts, Lettres et Civilisations

Parcours Textes, Images, Langues Étrangères

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And to my future self, be proud of yourself and look at what you have accomplished.

## Introduction

“My mommy always said there were no monsters, no real ones, but there are, aren't there?”<sup>1</sup>

This quotation, from the second opus of the *Alien* franchise, represents this essay the most. Indeed, monsters are everywhere and can take any form: they might be a gigantic monstrous alien, a human being, a male or female, a child, an egg, a company... Nobody is safe in the *Alien* franchise, people can only trust themselves, and Ellen Ripley understands this at her own expense. There are four films, two prequels, two crossovers, and several video games, all with few things in common: they all have a corporation and a Xenomorph as antagonists, as well as a female human survivor, which is to say, a Final Girl. Gender in the franchise has long been studied. Indeed, analyzing female figures is interesting to understand the hidden message behind those films, what female characters fear, and what male characters dread. Gender phobia exists on both sides: there is the female abject, the male fear of the female body, the female phallicized to kill the monster, and so on. The *Alien* franchise was and continues to be a major body of work thanks to the character of Ellen Ripley who made, and makes, a big impression on spectators' minds. She is considered as being one of the strongest female protagonists in science fiction. This study research will concentrate on gender and sexuality in the franchise as they reflect women's living conditions of the 1950s to the end of the third wave of feminism.

This reflection of male and female fears about each other also underlines the effects of women's empowerment at the start of the second wave of feminism in the United States. Almost every theme in the franchise is tied to gender, from physical appearances to acts, gestures, and text lines; every aspect can be put in parallel with gender studies.

This master's thesis will focus on how the company and the Xenomorph are serving patriarchy through their actions and appearances. Even though the Xenomorph has no gender, it is a complex creature that only cares about the continuity of its race, yet it is also a tool for the corporation that wants to achieve its goal, fueled by patriarchy and capitalism.

The first part will contextualize women's struggles in America from the first wave of feminism to the third wave through the second wave of feminism. Even though we might focus a lot more on second-wave feminism, it is still crucial to understand how women have always fought to access the public sphere and have equal rights as men. Women returning home after

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<sup>1</sup> Newt in *Aliens*, director's cut: 1:28:35



World War II experienced a backlash against women's rights, and it is important to understand the time "before" the backlash.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, can help us understand how and what women were victims of in postwar America as well as their fears. We all have an image of the perfect housewife preparing dinner and waiting for her husband, which was not a cliché. Women in the 1950s were confined at home, away from the public sphere. They had to put their husbands' and children's needs ahead of their own. It was not recommended for women to have a job and be a housewife at the same time. Being a housewife was the fundamental goal to be considered feminine, and so to be accepted by society. In this same part, we highlight why *Alien* is new for the cinema industry, particularly in the science fiction genre which was previously dominated by male figures. Furthermore, in this part, the *Alien* franchise will be introduced not only with the plot of each film but the relevance of working with this franchise within the background of second-wave feminism.

The second part will theorize how females are represented in the first three movies. Female characters in the franchise are usually survivors, therefore the definition of the Final Girl by Carol J. Clover is going to be used to show how Ripley and other female characters are not like pre-*Alien* Final Girls. At home, housewives were fighting their own demons and were victims of paranoia, while in *Alien*, Ripley was confined into a spaceship, in *Aliens* in a colony, and in *Alien<sup>3</sup>* in a penitentiary. In each film, Ripley is confined into a space with threats such as Xenomorphs, members of Weyland-Yutani, or male inmates who make Ripley a victim of the company, and patriarchal figures. Female figures are also depicted in many different ways in the franchise. Indeed, the theory of the *Vagina Dentata* is represented in the character of the Alien Queen, as well as other Xenomorphs. Men fear castrating female characters, which is which is a recurring theme in the franchise and can be found in androgynous characters as well as mother figures.

The final part will explore what the Xenomorphs stand for and who is represented by the figure of the Monstrous Mother. The Xenomorph's physical description will be tied to gender studies and will highlight both male and female features that imply a threat in its appearance and behavior. Then, motherhood in the franchise will be put under scrutiny with the character of the Alien Queen and Ripley. Both will be compared to determine who serves whom, who fears what, what they both symbolize, and whether they are similar, different or

both. The final subpart emphasizes in Ripley's fear and guilt as a mother and how her sacrifice leads to a martyr figure.

This study will focus on the three first movies, *Alien*, *Aliens*, and *Alien<sup>3</sup>* directed by three different directors, in three different decades. The prequels and video games will be mentioned at times.

## l) Cultural Context: Second Wave Feminism

### a) Women's movement from the 1950s to the 1980s

#### 1) The dawn of feminism in the United States

To understand the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, we must travel back in time and see what women went through in order to have better living conditions. Betty Friedan (1921-2006) is a pillar of the American feminist movement. Indeed, she published in 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* which became the significant work that launched second-wave feminism in the United States. She enrolled in Smith University and pursued a degree in psychology at the University of California and she founded the National Organization for Women in 1966 (Biography, Penguin Books). She was a cornerstone of the American feminist movement. After WWII, American society contributed to the development of what Friedan theorized as “the feminine mystique”. The feminine mystique is the mystification of women set up by American society and reinforced by commercials, education, and magazines, which results in an image of the woman that is mystified. The concept of the female mystique was designed to pressure women into conforming (Friedan 9) and fitting into the traditional "housewife" role (Friedan 116).

The first wave of feminism arose “on the heels of the Revolutionary War and grew strong with the movement to free the slaves.” (Friedan 75) Lucy Stone was an activist in the abolition of slavery as well as in the women's rights movements. She said that “marriage is to a woman a state of slavery.” (Friedan 79). At that time, women were eager to change things for slaves as human beings and to extension these rights to all humans, in particular to themselves as women. Betty Friedan states that:

The women who formally launched the women's rights movement at Seneca Falls met each other when they were refused seats at an anti-slavery convention in London. Shut off behind a curtain in the gallery, Elizabeth Stanton, on her honeymoon, and Lucretia Mott, demure mother of five, decided that it was not only the slaves who needed to be liberated (Friedan 75)

Feminist movements arose as a result of women's lack of human rights and the fight against slavery. However, women were influenced not only by the abolition of slavery; they were also influenced by what happened abroad. One century before the first wave of feminism, the French Revolution affected many philosophers and movements around the world by questioning the power of the state or the monarchy depending on the country. Still, a century after the French Revolution, women in the United States were inspired by images of women "frequently on the front lines advocating for their rights." (Feminism: The First Wave) and "armed French women marched from markets in Paris to the Palace of Versailles." (*ibid*) Moreover, The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen (*ibid*) in 1791 by Olympe de Gouges was another work that inspired American women during the French Revolution. This declaration asserts that "Women are born free and are man's equal in law" (*ibid*). However, in France, it is only in 1944 that women gained the right to vote<sup>2</sup>. First wave feminism was influenced by the French Revolution and the abolitionist movement, as well as by the temperance movement. A century before Prohibition took place in the United States, the Temperance movement restricted "the consumption of alcohol" (*ibid*). For many American women but also men, alcohol was viewed as being a "threat to the stability of their home" (*ibid*).

Women played a significant role in reshaping American culture, inspired by the French Revolution and women's engagement in the Abolitionist and Temperance movements. Thus, in 1848, "The first Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls" (Friedan 74), pledged to address the issues that women were faced with such as the "right to property" (Friedan 74), "the wages [women] earn" (74), and "obedience" (74) towards their husbands. When a woman gets married, she pledges that her husband can "deprive her of her liberty, and [gives him the right] to administer chastisement" (74) and even "den[y] her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education" (74). However, women needed the right to vote to have the right to property and education, as well as to be free of their husband's dominance. The first wave of feminism first advocated for equal human rights without regard for gender, and it was recognized that women of color "were facing not only sexism, but also racism, and classism."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> To see further, check this website: France 24. *France Marks 70 Years of Women's Voting Rights*. 21 Apr. 2014, <https://www.france24.com/en/20140421-france-womens-voting-right-anniversary>.

<sup>3</sup> To see more about the involvement of women of color as Black women, Asian women, and Latina women in the first wave of feminism, check this website "Feminism: The First Wave." *National Women's History Museum*, <https://www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/feminism-first-wave-0>. Accessed 20 Jan. 2023.

The wave crested in August 1920 with the 19th Amendment which “grant[ed] women the right to vote.”

Feminism in America has a long history that is characterized by waves. There are four waves of feminism, and each wave is distinct. The first wave of feminism lasted from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, and it primarily sought the right to vote for white women and property rights.

## 2) The aftermath of the second world war: the housewife versus the career woman

Friedan chose the title *The Feminine Mystique* to describe the societal construct perpetuated to limit women’s life choices in the post-World War II era. This concept, to which middle-class white women aspired, depicted the image of the housewife, who prioritized her family’s needs over her own, had no professional career, and housewives symbolized the cozy home after living through the horrors of WWII. However, women who tried to conform to this image of the perfect housewife felt a difference between conforming to this image and the reality of living with it. A peculiar disparity existed between the actual experiences of women and the idealized image they were striving to adhere to, which Friedan later referred to as the “feminine mystique.” (Friedan 9)

In other words, “the feminine mystique” describes the false notion that “real” women find complete fulfillment in marriage, children, and running a household; they have no need of outside stimulation or employment. This concept was particularly reinforced throughout society via advertising, government propaganda, and depictions of family life on television.

Following World War II, women were suddenly sent back to their homes to conform to the feminine mystique. Indeed:

After the loneliness of war and the unspeakableness of the bomb, against the frightening uncertainty, the cold immensity of the changing world, women as well as men sought the comforting reality of home and children. (Friedan 160)

Betty Friedan pointed out that something was wrong with this life choice, when girls and women returned home to fulfill their lives adjusting themselves to the feminine mystique. She

called it “the problem that has no name” (Friedan 13). This problem has no name since American women struggled to identify what was causing this sense of dissatisfaction they were living with and to give words to their feelings. Throughout her book, Friedan characterizes the problem that has no name as being “caused by adjustment to an image that does not permit them to become what they now can be” (Friedan 270). As a result, this “image” is the expectation of the perfect housewife who lives only for her husband and children, for the conformity imposed by the educators and Freudian philosophers, propagated to housewives through various media. So, they adjust to this hollow shell, this person who has no identity nor personality or other purposes in life than taking care of others rather than herself by buying household products and appliances, makeup and clothes pushed on her by advertising.

But staying at home became a serious matter for housewives’ mental health. Certain women who became housewives made what was considered by Friedan as “the mistaken choice”. This represents the idea of housewives fully committing themselves to the role of the housewife.

Sixteen out of the twenty-eight were in analysis or analytical psychotherapy. Eighteen were taking tranquillizers; several had tried suicide; and some had been hospitalized for varying periods, for depression or vaguely diagnosed psychotic states (Friedan 206).

Women sought identity through a variety of means, including sex, but “sex itself cannot give identity to a woman, any more than to a man” (Friedan 289). Women were also seeking identity through the possession of domestic objects that a housewife requires in order to be a complete woman. She “is forced to seek identity and self-esteem in the only channels open to her: the pursuit of sexual fulfillment, motherhood, and the possession of material things.” (Friedan 273-274)

In contrast to the ideal housewife, educators, Freudian philosophers, and the media established the “career woman” as the other end of the spectrum of femininity. Both the perfect housewife and the career woman are conveyed to determine what makes women feminine or unfeminine. Women felt feminine after conforming to the feminine mystique and respected the role of the housewife, but “if they were spinsters [or] if they had not had babies, they were forbidden by the mystique to speak as women” (Friedan 139). Friedan highlights the idea that indeed women had access to education and they could participate in society and find a purpose in their lives other than being a mother who stayed at home to take care of the house and the

children. But in a sense, they were forbidden to be anything other than feminine, and they were directed to follow what society expected them to be. The “education for women has become so suspect that more and more drop out of high school and college to marry and have babies” (Freidan 60). The mystique discouraged women to pursue education, so they could not deviate from what is expected from a woman, to be a housewife.

Friedan offers various suggestions towards the end of *The Feminine Mystique* for housewives to re-enter the public sphere and create a new identity for themselves. Actually, she states that “education was the key to the problem that has no name only when it was part of a new life plan and meant for serious use in society” (Freidan 316). Young girls and women should remain in the educational system rather than making “the mistaken choice” of entering the sphere of the housewife. Indeed, the educational system in America ought to change. Friedan claims that women can get the same bill G.I.s got after World War II<sup>4</sup>. Friedan adds that “women who have matured during the housewife moratorium can be counted on for similar performance” (Friedan 324). This solution can offer women who had left school to become housewives not only to educate themselves, but also to be part of society, and build a new identity they did not have as housewives.

### 3) Feminist movements in the 70s and 80s

*The Feminine Mystique* was such an immense breakthrough for women’s rights. It achieved remarkable success selling three million copies within the first three years and revitalizing the feminist movement (Feminism: The Second Wave, Kerri Lee Alexander). In 1963, John Fitzgerald Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act, which mandated equal pay for comparable work regardless of gender (*ibid*). Likewise, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, specifically Title VII, prohibited workplace discrimination based on race, religion, sex, or national origin (*ibid*). The groundbreaking Supreme Court case *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965 further safeguarded women's reproductive rights by preventing restrictions on access to contraception and other birth control methods (*ibid*). The passing of the *Roe v. Wade* bill in 1973 granted women the freedom to choose abortion. While several legislative acts favoring women were enacted in the 1960s and 1970s, the second-wave feminist movement experienced internal divisions and

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<sup>4</sup> The G.I Bill is an act voted in 1944 for G.I.s (American soldiers) who “needed the education to find their identity in society” (Friedan 324).

fragmentation into sub-groups, diluting its influence. Betty Friedan, a co-founder and former president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) from 1966 to 1970, utilized the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to advocate for increased job opportunities for middle-class white women, recognizing the challenges faced by African American individuals who confronted racial job discrimination and lived in poverty. Additionally, the 1960s witnessed growth in the gay rights movement, and the subsequent decade saw the rise of lesbian movements, ultimately leading to the gradual decline of the second-wave feminist movement by the early 1980s (Friedan biography, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1992).

The second wave of feminism later splintered into various subcategories of gender and sexual orientation struggles. The third wave is more “inclusive of the various challenges [facing] women from different races, classes, and gender identities” (Feminism: The Third Wave)<sup>5</sup>. A new feminist wave gave birth to new feminist activists and writers such as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* in 1990 and Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* also published in 1990. While women demanded fundamental rights in the first wave, the second wave emphasized women’s liberation and emancipation from their roles as housewives.

The third wave placed significant emphasis on “women’s social and political identities”<sup>6</sup>. The event which marked a turning point at the beginning of the third wave of feminism was the 1991 Anita Hill sexual harassment case against Clarence Thomas. This event encouraged many women “to speak out against their own experiences with sexual misconduct”<sup>7</sup>. Women not only admitted that they were sexually assaulted, but “the case also caused women to question the male-dominated leadership in Congress”<sup>8</sup>. More women opted to enter politics and more women were elected to Congress. In fact, in 1991, twenty-seven women were elected, and it was named “The Year of The Woman”. Not only did politics help women to be at the forefront of activism, but so did music including the punk rock movement known as the “Riot Grrrl Movement” in which bands primarily made of women who fought against sexism, patriarchy, abuse, racism, sexuality, and rape”<sup>9</sup>. There was also the Guerrilla Girls movement which

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<sup>5</sup> “Feminism: The Third Wave.” *National Women’s History Museum*, <https://www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/feminism-third-wave>. Accessed 27 Jan. 2023.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*



campaigns in the 1980s “in response to sexism and racism in the art world”<sup>10</sup>. Third-wave feminism ended after the rise of technology, but “some scholars believe that the third wave never came to an end, and it continues on to this day” (*ibid*).

Throughout the progression of feminism, American society has witnessed the emergence of various waves, each advocating for its distinct rights and objectives. Friedan's book was instrumental in the liberation of women during the second wave of feminism. However, it also played a role in paving the way for the development of more expansive and inclusive forms of feminism observed in the third wave and continuing to the present day.

## **b) Representation of Women on Screen: Changing Roles**

### 1) Media representation of women before and after second world war

Betty Friedan observed how women in magazines, books, advertisements and movies has influenced women's perceptions and how they depicted and imagined their future. Media “shapes women's lives today and mirrors their dreams” (Friedan 30). Indeed, the portrayal of women in magazines and fiction shifted before and after WWII. Betty Friedan says that “In 1939, the heroines of women's magazine [...] There was a definite aura that their individuality was something to be admired” (Friedan 34). So, in 1939, women could see themselves in a character who are free of their will, deciding their future plans without being suffocated by patriarchal norms. However, the Second World War transformed from a free-will woman into something else. Friedan adds that:

By the end of 1949, only one out of three heroines in the women's magazines was a career woman—and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career and discovering that what she really wanted to be was a housewife. (Friedan 39)

And even ten years after the end of the second world war, “In 1958, and again in 1959, I went through issue after issue of the three major women's magazines [...] without finding a single heroine who had a career, a commitment to any work, art, profession, or mission in the world, other than “Occupation: housewife.”( Friedan 39)

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

Betty Friedan also noted a shift between before the second world war in terms of the change in female characters in movies. She highlights that prior to the war, the only "career woman" depicted in films was the actress herself (Friedan 46). However, Friedan notes that these actresses underwent a remarkable change in their on-screen personas. They shifted from being complex individuals with fiery temperaments, inner depth, and a mysterious combination of spirit and sexuality to becoming sexual objects, baby-faced brides, or housewives (Friedan 46). To illustrate this shift, Friedan contrasts renowned actresses of the pre-war era such as Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, Rosalind Russell, and Katherine Hepburn with post-war figures like Marilyn Monroe, Debbie Reynolds, Brigitte Bardot, and the character Lucy from the television show "I Love Lucy" (Friedan 46-47). This was primarily due to the return of men from war. Indeed, before the war, women's magazine editors were women, and after the war, women started to have children and dropped writing, letting men become editors for women's magazines. Men dreamed of a "cosy domestic life" (Friedan 47-48) and reimagined the role of female characters in women's magazines, from the career women to the perfect housewife. Friedan interviewed a woman who worked as an editor for a women's magazine. She said to Friedan that "the old image of the spirited career girl was largely created by writers and editors who were women" (Friedan 47). In contrast after the second world war:

As the young men returned from the war, a great many women writers dropped out of the field. The young women started having a lot of children and stopped writing. The new writers were all men, back from the war, who had been dreaming about home, and a cozy domestic life (Friedan 47,48)

From educators to magazines, the feminine mystique influenced what women should be and then desired to be. Friedan interviewed another woman editor for a women's magazine who stated that many women were psychoanalyzed and began to feel embarrassed about being career women themselves (Friedan 49). Not only did the feminine mystique erase the appearance of career women in magazines and on television: according to Barbara Creed in her work *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* published in 1993, female antagonist characters were always represented with monstrous traits. She states that several different psychoanalysts use Sigmund Freud's ideas that "woman terrifies because she is castrated, that is, already constituted as victim." (Freud qtd in Creed 7) According to Creed, this notion only perpetuates patriarchy by reinforcing the idea that women are by nature victims. (Creed 7). Other scholars such as Linda Williams explain "that the [female] monster is identified with masculinity and opens the way for a discussion of woman's 'power-in difference'" (Creed 6).

Women are monstrous because of their differences and Linda Williams also further suggests that the female victim shares a certain connection with the monster as both are perceived differently by patriarchal society (Creed 6). Creed also mentions how the trope of the monstrous female character is prevalent in Greek mythology such as Medusa and the Sirens. Freud interprets monstrous female characters as being as horrifying as women's genitals, which is linked to the fear of sexual difference and castration (Creed 2)

Because of men's dread of castration, female monsters have long been feared by them. They were also dreaded because the patriarchal order belief that women are castrated (Creed 5). According to Susan Lurie, the fear of castration stems from the fact that women are "physical[ly] whole, intact and in possession of all [their] sexual powers." (Creed 6) The Monstrous Feminine is hence the notion that women have power. This powerfulness, this emancipation of women is a threat to patriarchy, as they challenge the privileges traditionally enjoyed by men who fear to losing their privileges.

## 2) Women in science fiction before *Alien*

Science fiction shaped what humans wanted to explore. Alien life, monsters, outer space, dark futures, intelligent machines, time travel... Science fiction is the genre that asks the question "what if?". According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, science fiction is "a type of book, movie, etc. that is based on imagined scientific discoveries of the future, and often deals with space travel and life on other planets" (Science-Fiction Noun).

We, as humans, frequently wonder how long we will continue to live or how we shall disappear. However, in the film industry, the term "human" refers to the male gender rather than the female gender. All of this stems from the absence of female leading characters in science fiction, which results in male characters being perceived as representative of humankind in general due to their overwhelming presence.. It is challenging to find a science fiction movie in which the main character is a woman, who is not sexualized, with whom women can identify. It is paradoxical that women were put to the sidelines while a woman wrote the first science fiction novel. Lisa Yaszek, a professor of science fiction studies at the University of Georgia Technology adds that "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was very much the birth of science fiction. Shelley is one of the first authors to think about science and explore its impact on society". (11:17min). Even though Mary Shelley remains a significant writer for the science fiction genre, there is still much work to be done in terms of the representation of women in science fiction today.

In the cinema industry, female characters are relegated to the background in comparison to their male protagonists since the beginning of science fiction. The main science fiction movie of the 1960s was *2001: A Space Odyssey* released in 1968 and produced by Stanley Kubrick. In this movie, women work “in service to the male characters or sitting politely without significantly affecting the plot.” (*Evolution Of Women In Hollywood*, (1:44). We may next consider two more science fiction franchises that have female characters such as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars: Episode IV- A New Hope*. However, the majority of female characters do not have the main story around them, or if they do, the male protagonists solve the story or defeat the villain, but they are in the foreground of the plot. For example, in *Star Trek*, the character of lieutenant Uhura and in *Star Wars: Episode IV- A New Hope* the character of Princess Leia, both characters have a significant role, “but they were sideshows, primarily outside of the main plot driven by the male characters” (*ibid*) (3:21min)

Not only were women in science fiction movies left behind or were side characters, but many characters were portrayed in such a way that their appearance and behavior were uncomfortable for the viewer, which is what Madonna Kolbenschlag identifies as grotesque. The article “The Female Grotesque: Gargoyles in the Cathedrals of Cinema.” published in *Journal of Popular Film* discusses how “the films of the seventies have been populated with the ‘grotesque’ female: prostitutes, neurotic spinsters, schizos, nymphos, alcoholics, flakos and other crazies” (Kolbenschlag 328). She employs the concept of the grotesque from the German thinker Thomas Mann “which is excessively true and excessively real, not that which is arbitrary, false, unreal, and absurd” (330). She adds then that “it is precisely this quality of the experience of the grotesque which links it to the phenomenon of misogyny” (p330). She uses the example of Shelly Duvall in *3 Women* (Robert Altman, 1977) to illustrate the female grotesque.

According to Kolbenschlag, there are various reasons why female characters are presented with grotesque features. She also states that all these grotesque characteristics we can find in female characters lead to the humiliation of women’s own body features:

Whatever was dark, wet, irrational, sensual, emotional, "close to nature" was the "sphere" and special faculty of woman and hence, capable of eliciting sentiment as well as disgust, fear as well as shame. (Kolbenschlag 331)

With women confined to their homes after WWII, out of the public sphere, with female characters in science fiction movies as side characters and other female characters being on the

verge of madness and shame with grotesque, there is not only this dissatisfaction about women's lives, there is also a dissatisfaction with the representation of women on screen prior *Alien* which was the first step to a new wave of strong female characters on screen.

### c) Science-Fiction and the *Alien* Franchise

#### 1) Introducing the *Alien* Franchise

We might consider that *Alien* was a breakthrough for the science fiction genre when it came out in 1979. Ellen Ripley is the quadrilogy's female protagonist.

The first *Alien* (1979) was directed by Ridley Scott. The plot revolves around the crew of the spaceship The Nostromo. Seven characters make up the crew with Captain Dallas, Lieutenant Ellen Ripley, the Nostromo's navigator Joan Lambert, Brett, Executive officer Kane, Parker, and finally the android Ash. The crew is in hypersleep when the ship's computer "Mother" awakens them because it has detected a foreign planet on their course back to Earth. They choose to land on this planet, LV-426, and thus the disaster begins. A significant quantity of eggs were laying on the ground and officer Kane choose to approach one of the eggs. An alien life called the facehugger leaps out of the egg and remains attached to his face. Back on board, after Kane has been put on quarantine, the facehugger liberates Kane, and everything seems back to normal until Kane feels something pushing out of his chest.

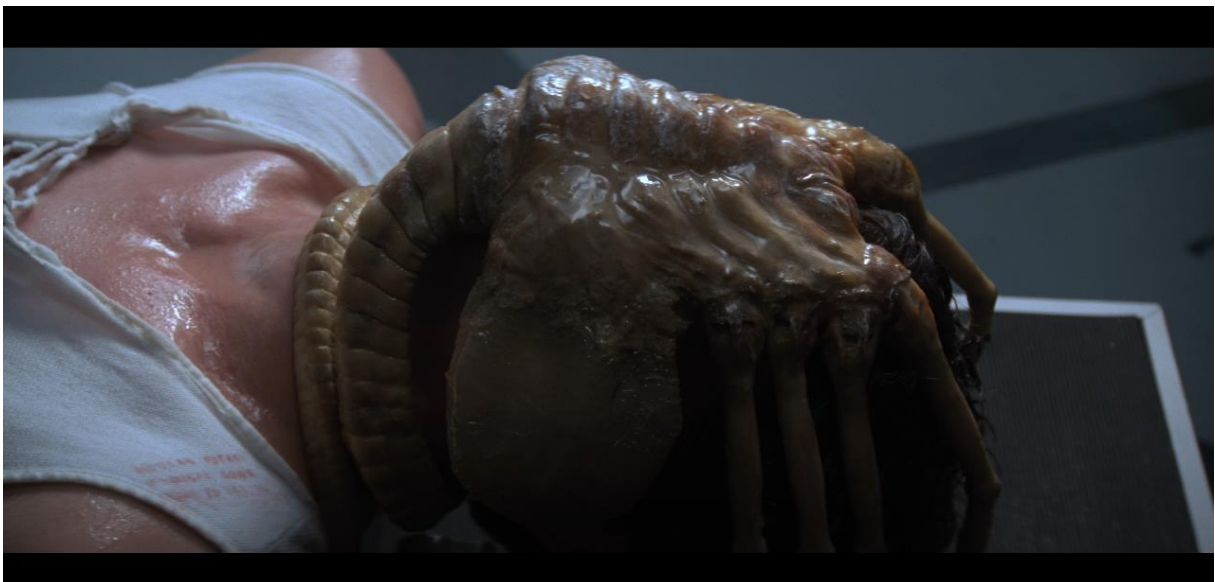


Figure 1: The Facehugger attached to Kane's face. *Alien*, Director's Cut, Ridley Scott, 2003, (00:36:05)

A tiny alien life erupts out of his chest, killing Kane, and fleeing the room leaving the crewmembers stunned. Throughout the movie, the alien life evolves into a 7-foot-tall-two-legged black monster with a long tail that kills everyone, except lieutenant Ellen Ripley and her cat Jonesy. At the end of the first movie, Ripley escapes the *Nostromo* in a capsule, but the Xenomorph is in the capsule with her and the cat. She puts silently a space suit, ejects the Xenomorph out of space, and presses the engine button burning him out.

In the second movie, *Aliens* (1986) by James Cameron, Ellen Ripley, who has survived, wakes up after 57 years in hypersleep. She is awakened by the Gateway spaceship in orbit around Earth. Suffering from violent nightmares about the alien, she learns that within these 57 years, the company Weyland-Yutani has sent colonists to LV-426. Surprisingly, they lose contact with the colonists on the planet and Ripley decides to go back to the planet as a consultant. In this movie, she meets various marines as well as the android Bishop. After they land on LV-426, they meet a survivor, a young girl named Newt. The marines using a detector finds the rest of the colonists near the Atmospheric Processor. They arrive and discover the colonists, all dead, in a cocoon, surrounded by a dark, sticky, organic environment. The marine are confronted by dozens of Xenomorphs. Five marines are killed and the survivors, safe again, decide to destroy the facility to eliminate all aliens. Burke is interested in keeping the alien alive due to the Xenomorph military potential. He decides to confine Ripley and Newt in a room and releases two facehuggers so they could be impregnated and bring them back to Earth. Ripley and Newt manage to save their lives, but then, the crew is attacked by a horde of Xenomorphs. When Newt is kidnapped by an alien, Ripley decides to return and save her. She not only finds Newt alive in a cocoon, but she also discovers the Alien Queen. Ripley with her flamethrower burns all the eggs and the Queen decides to hunt Ripley and Newt. When they arrive at the spaceship, Sulaco, the Alien Queen is following them. Ripley wears an exoskeleton robot to fight the Queen. Ripley kills the Queen by opening a vent, expelling the Queen's outer space. Ripley, Newt, the android Bishop, and corporal Hicks, are the only survivors who have gone into hypersleep. However, we hear an egg opening in the post-credit scene.

The third *Alien<sup>3</sup>* (1992) was directed by David Fincher; its story begins with the crash of the survivors of *Aliens*. Except for Ripley, all the crewmembers of the ship die. The ship crashes in Fiorina 161, a planet populated by male prisoners, but not only was Ripley the living being on the ship, but there was also a facehugger, who managed to impregnate a dog (or a hox in the long version). While Ripley, the only female in the penitentiary must survive murderers and rapists, an Alien grows and kills its first victim. Clemens tells about the acid they discovered

near the first victim's body. She decides to reconnect with the android Bishop who was on board with her, and he confirms the presence of an alien. Like in previous movies, Ripley must survive the Xenomorph, but the jail has no weapons, so the convicts and Ripley consider trapping the alien in nuclear waste and burning it, but they fail, killing a dozen prisoners. Ripley starts to experience pain in her chest, so she decides to do medical scans and discovers that she is carrying an embryo of an alien Queen inside her. The inmates get the idea of killing the monster by attracting him to the mold of the metalworking, by pouring lead on the alien. Morse, one of the convicts, manages to dump it on the Xenomorph who hops out of the lead, but Ripley pulled the button to activate the water on the alien, causing a thermal shock, killing the alien. Following the event, the rescue team arrives on the planet and proposes to Ripley to extract the embryo from her. Knowing Weyland-Yutani's intentions about the alien from the start, she decides to jump into the furnace, while the embryo is bursting out of Ripley's chest, holding it so it burns with her, leaving no alien life to the company.

## 2) *Alien* and Feminism

Studying the *Alien* movies is interesting because female characters survive in every movie of the franchise. In the original quadrilogy, we have the character of Ellen Ripley, but in the two prequels, we have Dr. Elizabeth Shaw in *Prometheus* (2012) by Ridley Scott who survives. In *Alien Covenant* (2014) by Ridley Scott, here again, we encounter the only human survivor who is again a woman, Daniels. In the video game *Alien: Isolation* (2014) released by SEGA, we play the character of Amanda Ripley, the daughter of Ellen Ripley who also survives the Xenomorph. Working on the prequels and the video game is also interesting, however the feminist movements in the 1970s and the 1980s are not the same in the 2010s. *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) by Jean-Pierre Jeunet is the fourth of the original quadrilogy. Furthermore, this movie is about Ellen Ripley who was cloned so by Weyland-Yutani. They did this in order to clone the alien in her chest and capture the Xenomorph for the company. We do have the character of Ellen Ripley in this movie, but it is not her anymore. Her attitude towards people and the Xenomorph is drastically different than in the three previous movies. For this movie a posthuman approach can be considered to analyze Ripley.

The first three movies are interesting to put in parallel with their context. When women gained the right to vote in the first wave of feminism, the second wave of feminism was a fight for women's identity, for women's need to emancipate from a male-dominated society, to be equal to men, and to have control over their own being. All the *Alien* movies and video games

contain a strong message about resolute female protagonists in science fiction, which was something new in 1979 when the first movie was released. Many theorists have previously discussed the significance of motherhood, the fear of female genitalia, and the fear of career women commonly known as strong women advocating for women emancipation. In this study, we are going to examine how the first three *Alien* movies reflect women's emancipation and the struggles they face.



## II) Theorizing the Representation of Female characters in the *Alien* Franchise

### a) Ripley and Newt: Final Girls?

#### 1) Definition of The Final Girl by Carol J. Clover and who are the Final Girls in *Alien* 1, 2, 3

In many horror movies anterior to *Alien*, especially in slasher movies, a new type of female character is present on screen. Carol J. Clover in 1992 published her essay *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* and theorized a new figure of female character in horror movies The Final Girl. Final Girls in horror movies are, as the name suggests, the last surviving female character. Clover also adds that The Final Girl “alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B).” (Clover 35). She uses examples of several Final Girls such as Sally in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1977), Laurie in *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978) and many much other slasher movies where the young woman character kills the evil force chasing her. As such, most Final Girls share common characteristics and physical traits that make them different from other girls, who often die in the slasher movies.

The Final Girl of the slasher film is presented from the outset as the main character. The practiced viewer distinguishes her from her friends minutes into the film. She is the Girl Scout, the bookworm, the mechanic. Unlike her girlfriends (and Marion Crane) she is not sexually active (Clover 39).

Indeed, Laurie in *Halloween* gets good grades, does not smoke, or think about men unlike her friends. In some ways, she is the perfect daughter parents wish they had: she is intelligent, gets good grades, and she doesn't waste her time with boys. Also, what sets a Final Girl apart from her female peers is her intelligence and survival instincts. Thus, “the Final Girl is also watchful to the point of paranoia; small signs of danger that her friends ignore, she registers. Above all she is intelligent and resourceful in a pinch” (Clover 39).

The Final Girl's physical appearance is also very different than the other female characters in the horror genre.

The Final Girl is boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine—not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself. (Clover 40)

Final Girls have then some specific features that make them distinguishable from other female characters. However, some movies tend to take the trope of The Final Girl and reshape it to create a new type of strong female character.

In *Alien* and *Aliens*, we have two main Final Girls: Ellen Ripley, lieutenant of the Nostromo in the first movie, and Newt, a child rescued by Ripley in the second movie. At no point, they both are “Girls”, Ripley is a woman, and a mother and Newt is a child. Both are surviving female characters, but their attitudes, behavior, traits and features set them apart from the original slasher Final Girls.

## 2) What makes *Alien* Final Girls different than in slasher movies?

Indeed *Alien*, introduces a new wave of female characters, particularly Final Girls. As previously stated, movies such as *Halloween* (1978) introduce the trope of The Final Girl. Ellen Ripley is a Final Girl, but she differs from her predecessors. What distinguishes Ripley from other Final Girls, is that she is the mechanic (Clover 39). Indeed, *Alien* is a science fiction movie, so Ripley needs to play a specific role in the Nostromo’s operation: she is a lieutenant, the second in command. However, this feature of the mechanic can also be seen in the second female character of *Alien*, Joan Lambert, who also has a key role: the role of navigator. Their temperament is what distinguishes them. Lambert begins to cry after Dallas’ death in the vents, whilst Ripley maintains her cold temper because she becomes captain of the Nostromo following Dallas' death.

Another aspect that distinguishes Ripley from other Final Girls is the notion that they are “boyish” (Clover 40). Aside from their masculine name such as “Stevie, Marti, Terry, Laurie, Stretch, Will, Joey, Max” (Clover 40), Ripley is rather called by her last name, which is also masculine, and not her first name Ellen Louise which is way more feminine and same for the character of Lambert, not called Joan Marie. This emphasizes that when a Final Girls has a masculine first or last name, this masculine one will be often selected to accentuate how different they are from other girls and that they take masculine traits in order to survive.



Figure 2: Lambert and Ripley in *Alien*, (00:11:05)

So, while Ripley and Lambert share some characteristics with traditional Final Girls, *Alien* stands out as a departure from the Final Girl trope. As previously said, Lambert and Ripley are both boyish by their names, and are by their appearance and behavior. Lambert has short blond hair while Ripley has black and curly mid-length hair. They do not correspond to the stereotype of the blond Final Girl such as Laurie in *Halloween*, Trish in *Slumber Party Massacre* and other several Final girls of the 70s and 80s. Unlike them, the shorthaired Lambert and the black-haired Ripley are both physically different from Final Girls. Furthermore, Ripley's status as the sole survivor lets us believe that a new "type" of female survivor has entered the Hollywood Industry.

What makes Lambert and Ripley so different are their decisions, which also have something to do with their temperaments. Again "the Final Girl is also watchful to the point of paranoia" (Clover 40). When Kane is attacked by the facehugger in the first movie, Ripley who is inside the ship, clearly says that they need a quarantine so as not to spread any viruses, and while she says it, she is very firm and does not flinch: while Lambert screams to get back inside the ship, Ripley remains focused on her responsibilities and adheres to the protocol. In this situation, Ripley is not exhibiting paranoia, as Clover suggests about Final Girls in general, but rather she is diligently aware of any potential risks. The last thing that distinguishes Ripley from other Final Girls, is that she is a mother. Final Girls are "not sexually active" (Clover 39), and they are Final "Girls", not Final "Women". Indeed, we learn in the second movie that Ripley is a mother of one child, Amanda Ripley, hence Ripley is far from being a "girl".

Furthermore, when the Final Girl arrives at a turning point in the story, when the horror ends (death of the villain, solving of the plot, ...) she tends to be phallicized (Clover 50) The last scene of *Alien* portrays Ellen Ripley when she arrives in the safety capsule far from the Nostromo. She uses a weapon that phallicizes her in the final scene. The harpoon itself might be interpreted as an embodiment of phallic characteristics. When Ripley uses it on the Xenomorph, the harpoon erects as soon as the trigger is pulled. Final Girls prior *Alien* frequently included phallicized weapons such as a machete in *Slumber Party Massacre* (Clover 40) or were saved by a male character like in *Halloween*. When it comes to eliminating the menace, male characteristics often come into play. So indeed, in *Alien*, Ripley not only eliminates the monster with a male feature (the harpoon), but she also presses a button that activates the engines and burns the Xenomorph out of space, by extension can be seen as a female feature. This phallicization of Final Girls might be linked to the belief that “a few women can attain senior positions in the big companies and corporations, provided they play the male game and are untainted by feminism” (Wood 17). To “fit in”, women must be phallicized, to adopt male features in order to be able to or to kill the monster in the horror genre.

Within the same last scene of *Alien*, Ripley is in her underwear and puts on a spacesuit. One might think it is a way to tell spectators that women must cover their femininity to annihilate the monster, which being phallicized is the only way to exterminate the Xenomorph. Indeed, *Alien* marks a progress of The Final Girl trope, yet this trope seems to be a gray area between sexism and feminism. While it is empowering to witness women defeating the last monster, evil forces, or a killer, the question arises: how can every woman empathize with Final Girls when the stereotype portrays them as white, blonde, nerdy virgin girls who are punished by the villain for conforming to that image? How can women connect with Final Girls who have masculine traits? Can a sexually active and feminine girl also be considered a Final Girl?

Alfred Hitchcock said in an interview on CBS TV on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1977, that "Blondes make the best victims. They're like virgin snow that shows up the bloody footprints."<sup>11</sup> He is well known for screening gorgeous blond actresses such as Tippi Hedren, Grace Kelly, Kim Novak, and others. This remark shows how prominent cinema figures also integrate the

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<sup>11</sup> To understand more the depiction of blondes in cinema, see this website concerning Alfred Hitchcock's point of view about blonde characters in the cinema: Hobbs, Georgie. "Live and Let Dye: Blondes on Film." *The Guardian*, 24 Mar. 2010. [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), <http://www.theguardian.com/film/gallery/2010/mar/24/blondes-on-film-sandra-bullock-hitchcock>.

archetype of the blonde victim and how successfully this stereotype is rooted in the films of the 1940s to 1960s, as well as in the slasher movies of the 1970s to 1980s. Ellen Ripley is a character who also shifts the trope of the blond Final Girl or victim, not only because she has black hair, but also because she is not a virgin, she does her job properly by following protocols and so on. If the crew had followed Ripley's quarantine, perhaps the Xenomorph would not have boarded, and the humanity would have been spared.

**b) Forcing the female to conform and stay “home.”**

3) Enclosed space, “comfortable concentration camps”

(Nostromo/Planet/Prison but Kitchen/Home in the 50s)

Because of the feminine mystique in the 1950s, women were, in a sense, forced to stay home. They had to be mothers, stay in the kitchen, and most importantly stay in their place as women. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan frequently compares the condition of women in the suburbs with Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler. “Kinder, Küche, Kirche,” [Children, Kitchen, Church] the slogan by which the Nazis decreed that women must once again be confined to their biological role. But this was not Nazi Germany. This was America. The whole world lies open to American women (Friedan 33). The propaganda of the Third Reich and the propaganda promoted by American society share a similarity in their belief in traditional homes and families. Both ideologies not only confine women to the home but also emphasize their biological role, encouraging them to embrace motherhood.

American young women were also taught that it was their role to stay home and have children, not to procreate for America to get “perfect” fighters like Nazi Germany did<sup>12</sup>, but for the sake of America's society, economy, and desire to create this “before the war” safe space which was home. Certainly, the experience of World War II brought to light the fact that numerous American men were mentally unprepared to handle the trauma of war and the challenges of being separated from their mothers. Seeking in their wives the comforting home they had witnessed before the war, GIs looked for a nurturing mother (Friedan 166).

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<sup>12</sup> To learn how women were involved in Nazi Germany, check on *Women in the Third Reich*. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/women-in-the-third-reich>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2023.

Prisoners in concentration camps had no personality, no identity: they were reduced to animals, and developed this regressive childish behavior (Friedan 265) in which they had to respect authority and submit in order to survive, where they lost their “individuality and merge themselves into an amorphous mass” (Friedan 265). Housewives were forced to stay at home, first by society itself, then by themselves, and to adapt to this personality of the feminine mother which was physically constrained by their home, or their camp. At the end of the chapter, Friedan says that:

The suburban house is not a German concentration camp, nor are American housewives on their way to the gas chamber. But they are in a trap [...] They must refuse to be nameless, depersonalized, manipulated and live their own lives again according to a self-chosen purpose. They must begin to grow. (Friedan 267-268)

In the *Alien* franchise, we experience an enclosed space where danger is present. Indeed, in the first film, the Xenomorph pursues everyone, men and women, with no exceptions. The fact that Ripley escapes from the monster and the company in the two first movies leads to various interpretations. In *Alien*, the Nostromo is controlled by an artificial intelligence named Mother. The ship sets up a sense that the spaceship is some sort of confined home, protected from outer space. Barbara Creed says that “the seven astronauts [in the first scene of *Alien*] emerge slowly from their sleep pods in what amounts to a rebirthing scene which is marked by a fresh, antiseptic atmosphere.” (Creed 18).



Figure 3: Mother in Alien (00:08:10)

The Nostromo itself is a womb and it was confirmed by the production's designer Michael Seymour<sup>13</sup> that Mother is an "enveloping, almost, womb-like feel". As a result, the Nostromo is designed to be a womb-like place, a place of safety, a secure haven, like a home away from danger. This can again be juxtaposed with how housewives felt in the 1950s. Indeed, women in the 1950s, victims of The Feminine Mystique, had to fit into the role of the housewife to be feminine, but not only they were victims of it, but their children were also victims of their mother's behavior.

These mothers have themselves become more infantile, and because they are forced to seek more and more gratification through the child, they are incapable of finally separating themselves from the child. Thus, it would seem, it is the child who supports life in the mother in that "symbiotic" relationship, and the child is virtually destroyed in the process. This destructive symbiosis is literally built into the feminine mystique. (Friedan 251)

The Nostromo first has a biological relationship with the crewmembers: it is a place with oxygen, and outside of it, there is simply void of outer space, where danger lurks. The Nostromo shares common points with a housewife and a mother of the 1950s. Indeed, the Nostromo is in symbiosis with the crewmembers, providing them food, air, beds, and everything else connected to what keeps the humans alive. The Nostromo in exchange get the opportunity to be a mother figure to the crewmembers. Mother get total confidence from the crewmembers. Knowing Mother is an AI controlled by the corporation, Mother leads them to death and resulting in its own destruction at the hands of Ripley. Indeed there is a symbiosis, however it is a destructive symbiosis as mentioned by Friedan. The Nostromo could have been a good "mother figure" if it had not been perverted by the company. Indeed, the ship is a tool from Weyland-Yutani, but the Nostromo, or Mother, does not decide the fate of it the crewmembers, as housewives for their children. Housewives are manipulated by society and by extension their children also, they do not own any power. When Weyland-Yutani sends a request to bring back the Alien on Earth, endangering their employees and all of humankind, Mother executes the plan.

This enclosed space of home and the spaceship might contribute to female paranoia and the malaise of being a mother as well as being imprisoned in this home but also in the Feminine Mystique. After the betrayal of Mother/Nostromo, Ripley is running away from the

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<sup>13</sup> Alien Special features DVD

Xenomorph. The imminent menace is no longer the company, it is this patriarchal figure the monster embodies. The alien can embody women's fear of abandoning their own identity in favor of The Feminine Mystique, if not society. Furthermore, the Xenomorph, is not the same monster throughout the franchise. Indeed, in each film, the Xenomorph chases humans to slaughter them, or to use their bodies to procreate via facehugger.

In the first film, paranoia is everywhere. Ripley is, indeed, inside the *Nostromo* which is filled with pipes, steam, cables, wires, an ominous atmosphere. As spectators, we feel that this place is not home: we are alienated to the *Nostromo* everything makes us think that we are in a safe place, but not home unlike the crewmembers, even after they awaken and their add life to the spaceship. Ripley is no longer in a safe place when the Xenomorph enters the inside of the ship; the Xenomorph is like the Feminine Mystique: it crawls inside women's minds to create paranoia but proliferates and by extension proliferate the patriarchy.

#### 4) The Female as Victim of Patriarchal Corporate Greed

We may believe that evil in the *Alien* franchise is only portrayed through the Xenomorph. Indeed, it slaughters every creature in its way, raping beings to procreate, but the most vicious evil force that occurs in the movies is the Weyland-Yutani corporation. The only figure that represents the company before the prequels are *Alien*<sup>3</sup>. Before Ripley commits suicide, she is confronted with a replica of the android Bishop from the second film.

In the *Alien* franchise, the corporation is much more ruthless than the creature itself. First, in the first movie Weyland-Yutani sends human beings to investigate LV-426, then they want to bring the alien life form on Earth to create weapons no matter how many human lives must be sacrificed. Then in the second film, *Aliens*, they send colonists on LV-42-6 knowing there is a dangerous alien form on this planet. In the *Alien* franchise Weyland-Yutani represents the corporation, the "one" that controls the fate of each character. They have the power to send their employees to death, as pawns. Having this power highlights that they are run by capitalism, that they only seek profit, willing to sacrifice employees to make a financial gain. Weyland-Yutani is controlled by men and is often personified by male characters such as the androids in both first films, Burke in *Aliens*, or Michael Weyland in *Alien*<sup>3</sup>.

American scholar Robin Wood, theorized in his book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan and Beyond*, published in 1987, the link between the corporation and patriarchy itself:



The most immediately obvious characteristics of life in our culture are frustration, dissatisfaction, anxiety, greed, possessiveness, jealousy, neuroticism: no more than what psychoanalytic theory shows to be the logical product of patriarchal capitalism. (Wood 54)

Both patriarchy and capitalism are distinct concepts, however they are often tied together and are visible in the *Alien* franchise. Patriarchy is “a society, system or country that is ruled or controlled by men” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary: Patriarchy) while capitalism is “an economic system in which a country’s businesses and industry are controlled and run for profit by private owners rather than by the government” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary: Capitalism). And as Wood points out in his book, “All real power (wealth) remains overwhelmingly in the hands of white heterosexual males” (Wood 17). So, the connection between corporate greed, capitalism, and patriarchy lies in the power men have over money.

Weyland-Yutani in the *Alien* franchise is a corporation that only wants the Xenomorph for profit and Ellen Ripley questions of the entire corporation and by extension to patriarchy itself (Wood 44). In *Aliens*, we have the character of Burke who is a personification of the company, sent by the Weyland-Yutani to bring the Xenomorph back on Earth, and Ripley discovers it in the movie. She plans to expose Burke’s intentions and confront him.

Ripley

I just checked the colony log. Directive dates 6-12-79, signed Burke, Carter J. You sent them out there, and you didn’t even warn them. Why didn’t you warn them, Burke?

[...]

Burke

So, I made a decision, and it was wrong. It was a bad call Ripley, it was a bad call.

Ripley

Bad Call? These people are dead Burke! Don’t you have any idea what you’ve done here? Well, I’m gonna make sure that they nail you right to the wall for this! You’re not gonna sleaze your way out of this one. Right to the wall.

(1:31:17 → 1:33:05)

Ellen Ripley works for the company in both first movies, hence she decides to expose Burke, and by extension the company's greed that puts the entire human race in jeopardy. In a way, she can be seen as a whistle-blower; she is ready to abandon her freedom and safety for the sake of humanity. Although she does not actually denounce Weyland-Yutani, she saves humanity by sacrificing herself in the third film.

However, Ripley is not only a victim of the greedy Weyland-Yutani. She also is a victim of the Alien Queen, as being the matriarch castrating character. Nearly every female character is seen as being castrating, which reinforces the fear of the female, more precisely to the concept of the *Vagina Dentata*.

### **c) *Vagina Dentata* all around: The Castrating Females of *Alien***

Much has been written about the viscous, dripping, repellent nature of the monster in the *Alien* franchise which that can be found in the Alien Queen's nature. Furthermore, the theory of the *Vagina Dentata* is significantly present. As Creed points out:

The myth generally states that women are terrifying because they have teeth in their vaginas and that the women must be tamed, or the teeth somehow removed or softened – usually by a hero figure – before intercourse can safely take place [...] As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity (Creed 2, 3).

As a result, there is a strong connection between Kolbenschlag's notion of the "Grotesque" and the "Monstrous-Feminine" of Creed. The female figure is portrayed with grotesque features that make her appear nothing like a "regular" female figure that fits into the spectrum of femininity. At some point, each female character in the *Alien* franchise is a "monstrous-feminine" figure.



Figure 4: Dripping Alien Queen in *Aliens* (02:18:18)

### 1) The Alien Queen and the Derelict: fear of female genitalia

The reason why in *Alien* the team arrives on LV-426 is that the Nostromo has encountered a new planet, and the corporation instructs them to investigate it, to find some sort of alien life. With the entry of the crashed spaceship, we have a visual image of female genitalia.

By examining the moment Dallas, Lambert, and Kane enter the Derelict spaceship, we can see the correlation between the ship and female genitalia. The entry of the Derelict has vertical and oval openings. The opening also has those streaks within, as shown on the picture right below, just like inside a vagina, and the surrounding area looks like a labia majora. Inside the uterus-like ship, it is likewise very wet and dark.



Figure 5: The entry of the Derelict, *Alien*, Scott, 1979 (00:26:09)

The comparison of female genitalia to a vessel in this movie underlines the reductive idea that women can only “contain” babies, as having guests/parasites in their uteruses. However, we detect eggs in this vessel as well. Again, this room can be viewed as an ovary where the egg of the female waits for the arrival of something or somebody to “open” it. Not only does the ship resemble the female anatomy, but we see the concept of procreation when Dallas, Lambert and Kane arrive at the ovaries and thus can be considered as a foreign creature in the female body.

One could even argue that this intrusion is a rape, but not as the rape of a woman's body specifically, but man's intrusion into the female sphere, or more precisely the intrusion of patriarchy, which harbors many preconceived functionalist ideas about the female body, female pleasure, and the role of the woman. According to Friedan, functionalists are social scientists who “attempt to make social science more “scientific” by borrowing from biology the idea of studying institutions as if they were muscles or bones, in terms of their “structure” and “function” in the social body.” (Friedan 112). According to Talcott Parsons, functionalism is instrumental in “keeping the social structure as it is.” (Friedan 117)

In the sixth chapter of *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963, Friedan challenges the idea that because they have a uterus, women's purpose in life is different than men's, thus reducing their role to one of procreation and child rearing. The mystique drew from Margaret Mead<sup>14</sup> of a world where women, through their femininity and motherhood, would earn the same respect as men for their creative achievements. It suggested that women's possession of a uterus and

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<sup>14</sup> Margaret Mead became a functionalist who glorified the sexual function of the woman, “increasing importance in the determination of woman's personality” (Friedan 123).

breasts granted upon them a glory inaccessible to men, even though men worked tirelessly throughout their lives to create.

In the *Alien* Franchise, the corporation dispatches the crew to investigate this mysterious vaginal female body-like wrecked spaceship. As a result, the company might be seen as the patriarchal urge to theorize and speculate upon women in order to put them in a predefined role that serves men and society.

The corporation strategically distances itself from the perceived "danger" associated with the female body by issuing orders to the crew members to investigate LV-426. They are pawns in some silly game being played by Weyland-Yutani, the firm behind all *Alien* movies, video games, and comic books. When employing the crewmembers to explore the derelict ship, this entity gives the impression that there is disdain when confronted with women's bodies. The crewmembers are like minions who will risk their lives, while the corporation only takes what benefits them.

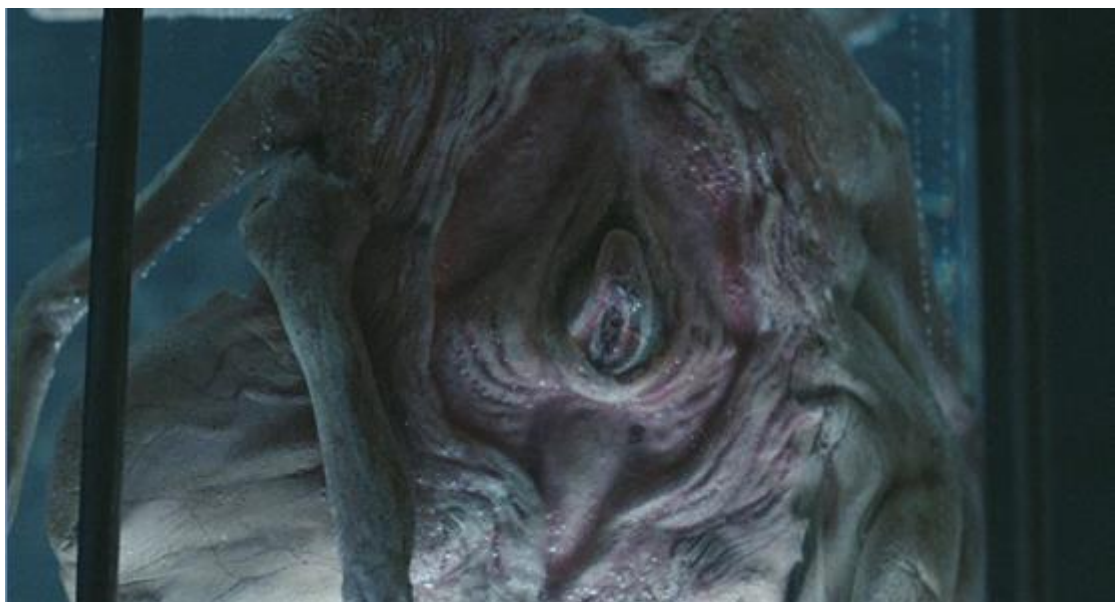


Figure 6: Facehugger in *Aliens* (00:53:22)

In *Aliens*, Ripley and the others find a laboratory with Facehuggers in tubes. Facehuggers resemble a vaginal form, and they could be regarded as being the fear of a woman's body. Moreover, for a long time, and still today, female genitalia are still considered taboo or a mystery. The way Facehugger move quickly and throw itself into people's faces reflects the mystery and anxiety that men have about female bodies. This odd, sticky, hand-shaped creature represents the terror of the female genitals.

For some people, it is as a threat to their own rights to minorities such as women, the LGBT+ community, and any minority groups seeking equal rights. The facehugger is here to burst from nowhere, to punish these people, it is here to represent female vengeance, female vengeance against patriarchy that does not want equal rights for women, that does not study the female body enough, and that has allowed this fear and mystery persist throughout centuries.

The Alien Queen in *Aliens* is a striking allusion to the castrating female figure. She is much taller than the Xenomorphs, about 4.5 meters high. She is dark and wet like the Xenomorphs, yet she is capable of laying eggs thanks to her long slimy, yellowish, and translucent egg sac. She has a massive forehead that resembles a crown<sup>15</sup>.

Mother Alien is primarily a terrifying figure not because she is castrated but because she castrates. Her all-consuming, incorporating powers are concretized in the figure of her alien offspring; the creature whose deadly mission is represented as the same as that of the archaic mother – to tear apart and reincorporate all life (Creed 22)

The character of the Alien Queen is indeed a mother figure, but she represents what men fear the most: castration. Feminists seek recognition as equals to men, whereas the alien Queen is the other side of feminism which is the anti-male type of feminism. Having equality between women and men does not take away men's rights, yet some individuals are satisfied within this patriarchal society. Indeed, it benefits white, rich, heterosexual, and often conservative men, and some of them are frightened of losing what they have inherited by birth. The Alien Queen is a strong female character, and while she embodies men's fear of castration, she castrates any human being without regard for gender. As a result, the Alien Queen is the type of female that cannot be accepted in a society because she castrates everybody: She is ugly, wet, and slimy, and destructive for men and women. Furthermore, she is laying Xenomorph eggs. Her sole goal is the survival of her own species. Because the Xenomorphs are the embodiment of a patriarchal figure, we can regard the Alien Queen as being the procreation of patriarchy as well.

The Alien Queen portrays a castrating mother and a character that tolerates this patriarchal society because she allows it to continue the production of these male figures (The Xenomorph). She is, indeed, a fear of castration and a fear of female genitals by her appearance and behavior, but she may be considered as a metaphor for women who are at ease in patriarchal society.

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<sup>15</sup> See the front cover

The Alien Queen can be interpreted as the embodiment of the fear of the rise of feminism, fear of female genitalia, and the continuity of patriarchy that Ripley will destroy at the end of the second movie. This phobia of female and female genitalia can be indeed seen in *Aliens* with the character of the Alien Queen. All “[these] element[s] obviously connects with the antipathy for female anatomy and the expressions of denigration and disgust which have always been associated with misogyny.” (Kolbenschlag 331)

The franchise highlights various elements that emphasize the fear of castration and female genitalia. However, it is important to note that the Alien Queen, despite representing the fear of feminism challenging patriarchy, is not a feminist figure. Her role primarily involves castrating individuals who are involved in the reproduction and perpetuation of the Xenomorphs.

## 2) The stereotype of the androgynous badass character

The 1980s were overflowing with movies featuring hypermasculine male characters. This is seen in movies such as *Terminator* (1984), *Predator* (1987), *Running Man* (1987), the first three *Rambo* movies (1982, 1985, 1988) among others. Male characters resembling Arnold Schwarzenegger were prevalent in the cinema industry in the film industry of the 1980s. These strong male characters were and continue to be praised. The *Terminator* franchise to this day continues to produce movies and the *Rambo* franchise concluded in 2019 with the movie *Rambo: Last Blood*.

With the character of Private Vasquez in *Aliens*, this uniformity of female features is inverted. Private Vasquez is the opposite of women under the feminine mystique. She is a marine, has shorter hair than Lambert in *Alien*, and dresses in a tank top exposing all her muscles, with an aggressive expression on her face.



Figure 7: Private Vasquez in *Aliens*, James Cameron, Director's cut, 2003, (00:35:45)

Indeed, her physical appearance matches with her profession: as a marine, she has a similar appearance to her male colleagues, especially large camouflage cargo pants, dust on their faces, and a fierce aspect. The utilization of cargo pants with a camouflage pattern is worth examining. Camouflage patterns are utilized by the military and hunters to hide in the woods, but on LV-426 in *Aliens*, there are no woods.

One would believe that there is a way to mock the stereotypical alpha male figure and the Hard Bodies (Dictionary Cambridge: Hard Bodies). Private Vasquez is one of the few characters of the 1980s movies who displays an exaggerated masculinity in both her physical appearance and behavior. While powerful women existed before Vasquez, they were not typically portrayed with such male-like attributes. She defies the traditional expectations of femininity with complete opposition to other female characters in the cinema industry: she is a subversion of the typical alpha male character. One can presume that nothing is left out in a movie, everything is chosen for a reason. The common point with the movies mentioned above is that they were all released during the cold war. Characters played by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone are allegories of the United States. They symbolize a powerful creature capable of crushing evil with impressive artillery. Private Vasquez, in *Aliens*, as a woman is a way to ridicule how men are portrayed in those trendy movies. Seeing a woman becoming like male alphas. In *Predator*, Arnold Schwarzenegger plays the main character, Dutch. He fights



the Predator which is a massive monster with the ability to become invisible. The differences between Dutch and Vasquez are largely minor, but the major one is indeed their gender.



Figure 8: Dutch in *Predator*, (00:46:05)

The inclusion of a female character to portray the “big arms” in *Aliens* alters the mind of the spectator. Vasquez is a representation of a new “type” of woman. She embodies the stereotype of the butch lesbian character; however, her sexuality is never stated in the movie. The only thing we know about her is her gender. She considers herself a woman: at 00:28:30 min of *Aliens* one of Vasquez’s mates asks her if she has “ever been mistaken for a man”, she replies “No. Have you?”. After replying with good repartee, we can confirm she is a woman and sees herself as a woman. But what about the viewer?

In an interview, Janette Goldstein who portrays Vasquez said:

A lot of gay women come up and say, ‘Oh my God, when I saw you, and you had a masculine look to you, I saw myself,’” Goldstein says. “But I had straight women coming up to me with the same thing. Someone was going through breast cancer, and she told me that with each round of chemo she would think of Vasquez. A gay man from Guatemala came up to me, and he said, ‘I identify so much with her,’ but he was very feminine. Vasquez is universal. (Interview Jenette Goldstein)

Everyone can relate to Vasquez: men, women, straight and non-straight... Vasquez, by embodying male features becomes a non-binary figure: this is why she is relatable. Like the Xenomorph that also embodies both male and female features, Vasquez and the alien both make a lasting impression in the spectators' minds.

The significant difference between Dutch in *Predator* and Vasquez in *Aliens* lies in Vasquez's gender identity and sexuality. Vasquez is portrayed as a genderless character, not conforming to the traditional notions of being a woman or a man. She also represents individuals who do not fit into the category of being a straight man. In contrast, Dutch is specifically intended to represent the archetype of a straight man. According to April Woolfe, "Vasquez is the likable unlikable person we all wish we could be because she's comfortable being herself" (*ibid*). Private Vasquez is a female character who, with her look, her behavior, is what men fear. She is an emancipated career woman, working with several male colleagues. She is not crushed by her coworkers. However, she follows orders from above, but like her male colleagues, she is seen as a marine first and foremost, not a woman.

### 3) Ripley as an androgynous castrating character

Where have all testosterone-filled women gone? How can a movie depict this type of character without falling into ridicule? Is using female characters a way to mock male characters in other movies? It is interesting to analyze the representation of the androgynous badass women in the three first *Alien* movies, especially with the image they convey.

Ellen Ripley is a tall white woman with long curly black hair. We can tell as soon as we see her that she is a woman, just like Lambert, the Nostromo's navigator. Physically, we assume their gender at first sight. Lambert, in contrast to Ripley, is a short, slim white woman with short hair. They both have very different personalities. Ripley is making decisions that will help her survive the terrifying Xenomorph whilst Lambert is sensitive, breaks into tears, and needs to be shaken up by Ripley to stop crying. In the first movie, Ripley and Lambert are still female, white, thin characters. However, what is interesting in the second movie, *Aliens*, is the idea that Ripley is not like "other women". When they wake up on the ship, the Sulaco, there are three women, but Ripley is the only one in panties, while the other women wake up in loose shorts. It is interesting to understand the character of Ellen Ripley and what she represents in the scenes where she is barely wearing clothes. She appears to be this woman who is unconcerned by the other's gaze. We can wonder if this is due to the producer's male gaze, but this is not the case. If James Cameron wanted to sexualize women, why Lieutenant Ripley and not Private Vasquez

or Caporal Ferro who also are women? Sexualizing Private Vasquez would have contradicted Goldstein's character, Vasquez being hyper-masculine, and sexualizing her as Ripley would have ridiculed and ridiculed the tone of *Aliens*, which is still a horror and science fiction film. Other women are as feminine as Ripley such as Caporal Ferro, yet she is in shorts like Private Vasquez.. Indeed, the fact that Ripley is the only one in panties makes us think about the lack of privacy in motherhood. To begin with, when a woman gives birth, she is surrounded by doctors and/or midwives, there is no privacy, which is normal so the baby can be born safely. When raising children, a mother rarely has time for herself to have private moments to rest or just be alone. Ripley being the only known mother is frequently exposed to us, the viewers, and exposed half-naked to the cat and the Xenomorph in the first movie and the entire crew when they wake up in the second one. It appears that in the *Alien* franchise, the female, but particularly the mother female, is the one subjected to voyeurism.

### III) The Phallic Xenomorph Patriarchal Figure versus the Monstrous Feminine Mother

#### a) The Xenomorph: “The perfect Organism”

##### 1) Physical description: a reference to male and patriarchy

The plot of each *Alien* movie relies on the story of humans, often female protagonists who fight against an alien form of life. The monster is named The Xenomorph. In Latin, “*Xeno*” is related to “something strange, different or foreign” (Collins English Dictionary: Xeno) hence the word “xenophobia” the fear of strangers for instance. “Morph” can refer to several different things. It could be the abbreviation of “morphological” then we can interpret the “Xenomorph” as being a “the strange morphology”. While “morph” can also allude to the term “morphing” (Collins English Dictionary: Morph), the Xenomorph changing shape in each movie and its own evolution can be translated as being “the strange morphing creature”. Every interpretation is possible; however, it is undoubtedly an idea of a strange creature that is different from humans, hence again the word “Alien” which comes from “Alienation” which is like “estrangement” (Collins English Dictionary: Alienation).

The origin of the design of the Xenomorph is credited to the Swiss artist Hans Ruedi Giger. His art is characterized by what he called “Biomechanical” art. It is a combination between organic life and mechanics. In *James Cameron’s Story of Science Fiction, Episode 1 - Alien Life Documentary*, Hans Ruedi Giger stated that he was an “industrial designer, it helped [him] very much to design a creature” (27:05).

Alec Gillis, the creature effects designer of the *Alien* Franchise also affirms that:

The Xenomorph have a fantastic basic design that employed a sort of psycho-sexual imagery as well as deaf imagery, and you know the phallic head and its life cycle that basically starts with rape.<sup>16</sup>

The Xenomorph is 2 or 3 meters tall, black, biped, with a long tail. The first *Alien* movie released in 1979 is devoid of computer-generated imagery (CGI). However, the producers and designers were able to create a Xenomorph by giving a suit of the monster to the actor Bolaji

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* (27:15)

Badejo. It has a first jaw that opens revealing a second jaw with a row of teeth and exerting a deadly pressure on its victim like a slaughter gun by perforating its victim.



Figure 9: Bolaji Badejo and Percy Edwards in *Alien*

In the documentary *James Cameron's Story of Science Fiction, Episode 1 - Alien Life Documentary*, Sigourney Weaver said:

Ridley met Badejo Bolaji at a pub; he was an art student. He was about 7ft4, his limbs were so beautiful and exotic that he already looked like he was from another world. The days when Bolaji came in, we didn't hang out with him, he is the unknown. And it's really a combination of strange beauty and elegance and sex and violence that I think make the Xenomorph a great monster. (29:52)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*



Figure 10: Bolaji, Giger and Scott

Giger then designed a monster with a phallic head shape, a jaw which can thus be related to the *Vagina Dentata*, and again can therefore be a hybrid of two genders, female and male, thus would be a non-binary creature. Even though Ridley Scott declared that the Xenomorph has no gender (Interview Ridley Scott), the creature still shows female and some male features. The female features can be seen in the Alien Queen in the second movie, but about the Xenomorphs themselves, they can be seen as a personification of patriarchy, not only by their physical appearances, but also their behaviors.

The Xenomorph breaking into the spaceship could be indeed a representation of manhood and patriarchy, and a representation of womanhood as the alien being a “fetishized phallus of the archaic mother” (Creed 22).

There is a dichotomy between motherhood and manhood. In the *Nostromo*, we have an AI that is named “Mother” controlling the spaceship. Everything seems perfect at the beginning of the movie. Once again, the *Nostromo*, including Mother, is a perfectly safe womb in which the crew can work. When they arrive on LV-426 and Kane gets violated by the monstrous arachnoid face-hugger, they manage to go back to the spaceship, refusing Ripley’s orders to maintain a twenty-four-hour quarantine; the intrusion is subtle and slow. It first infects a single

crew member before infecting the whole spaceship. This idea that the Nostromo is a mother leads us to think that the Alien, that is to say patriarchy, has violated the mother's womb and all her crew members who can be seen as her offspring.

We can emphasize that the only surviving character is a character who represents feminism in the United States (Ripley), and that the Alien represents the death of the phallic patriarchal civilization. This murder of Nostromo, compared as a womb, is a kind of attempt to destroy patriarchal norms. Hence, the Nostromo rotten by the Xenomorph, and by extension by patriarchy, dies at the end. So not to spread patriarchal ideology, Ripley orders the destruction of the Nostromo. Furthermore, when the Nostromo explodes, it ejects some sort of emergency capsule where Ripley and the cat are supposedly safe, as if the Nostromo is giving birth to a capsule. Unfortunately, a Xenomorph can slither into this emergency capsule. It underlines the idea that the Nostromo/Mother/Womb is neither able to kill the patriarchal legacy which can sneakily spread itself as patriarchy is subtle, nor protect her daughter/Ripley from it. Ripley must confront this massive patriarchal monster to survive: she has no choice but to do it that way. She opens the portal of the capsule which sends the Xenomorph out into space and then uses a harpoon to pierce the Alien, floating in space. This idea of the Xenomorph floating into space held by a rope is an allegory of birth. It is like the umbilical cord which connects the mother to her newborn.



Figure 11: Final scene in *Alien* (01:46:35)

Following this, the Xenomorph enters one of the engines of the capsule, with the intention of going back inside to kill Ripley, but she presses the button starting both engines and burning the Xenomorph. This extermination of the Alien can be interpreted as the victories women experienced through feminism. Women's rights were progressive, it was not that they did not

develop overnight. The right to vote, the right to abortion, the fight for equal pay and so on forged what feminists want: equality between genders. Those fights were indeed progressive this is also why it takes more than two *Alien* movies, not to say six movies, to kill the Xenomorph, to the extent to abolish patriarchy. Feminist fights are long fights and tedious.

Ripley can crush this Xenomorph that can be compared to a biped human man, but patriarchy is rotten to its core and cannot be exterminated with one blast of an engine. Ellen Ripley can be compared to significant figures in the feminist movement, as well as women in general, fighting against patriarchy and sexism. The idea that Ripley is alone in space facing this Alien leads us to think that it is not only Ripley facing this type of Alien/men but every day, anywhere on Earth, women are facing sexism and white male privilege. Ripley being in some sort of isolated place is like women at home suffering from patriarchy. As Betty Friedan mentions in *The Feminine Mystique*, following WWII, women returned home, portraying this idea of the housewife caring for the kids and the laundry and her man. According to traditional norms of the 1950s, women were isolated in a place that they were meant to belong to. And when they became aware of their lack of identity and purpose in life, they started to talk to each other to understand this “problem that has no name”. Ripley expelled this Alien out of space as women expelled this convention of the perfect housewife.

We can also interpret the rejection of Xenomorph from the Nostromo as being a rejection of an unacceptable form of a child. In the three first movies, the Alien is “the other” the unacceptable form of body for a mother to give birth to, both literally and metaphorically. Indeed, the Alien is ejected into space by Ripley and by its own biological and metaphorical parents who are the egg and Kane. Kane gets raped by the face hugger and then dies by giving birth, demonstrating how unwanted and unacceptable this form of life is. We still do not know where those eggs are originally from, or where the Xenomorphs came from, and everything is explained in the prequel *Prometheus*, Ridley Scott, 2012. We only know in the second movie that the Alien is born the same way ants and bees are born, with an egg-laying Queen. Furthermore, the Xenomorphs also have metaphorical parents, such as the Nostromo itself and the emergency capsule Ripley is in at the end of the movie.

Both the biological (the Alien Queen, or the host) and metaphorical (Nostromo) “parents” have the same appearances as the Xenomorph. Indeed, the Xenomorph appears mechanical and can be confused with the pipes and machinery of the Nostromo. However, it also is biped when its facehugger rapes a human, or four-legged when its rapes a four-legged animal such as an ox



in the third film. The Xenomorph develops its physical features by whom he was developed in, as a child having the same physical characteristics of his parents.

- 2) Case study: “You still don’t understand what you’re dealing with, do you? A perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility.”

The Xenomorph appears to be this unacceptable “in-between” in the gender spectrum. It first can be seen as a representation of the patriarchy, and this non-binary figure, which is as frightening to women, as to most men. Whenever something is not a male-gendered figure, it frightens the individuals who have privileges in a patriarchal society, which are rich white men.

The *Alien* franchise is also the story of the corporation Weyland-Yutani which wants to own the Xenomorph. Indeed, in the first movie, the android Ash was created/hired to bring back Alien life on Earth to identify it. After receiving a distress signal, the crewmembers land on LV-426 and decide to investigate, however, Ripley tells Ash that the signal is more likely to be a warning alert and wants the crewmembers of the planet to know about this signal, but Ash replies that they will discover soon if it is one or not implying that Ash is already willing to risk the lives of the crew members to recover the alien. Again, when the facehugger rapes Kane, Ripley request a 24-hour quarantine, however, Ash opens the airlock room anyway. When Ripley discovers that the company hired Ash to get the Xenomorph back on Earth, he attacks her, but Lambert and Parker save Ripley, kill Ash, and decide to resurrect Ash by reconnecting him, as he is an android.

**Ripley:** How do we kill it- there’s gotta be a way of killing it how, how do we do it?

**Ash:** You can’t

**Parker:** Bullshit!

**Ash:** You still don’t understand what you’re dealing with, do you? A perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility.

**Lambert:** You admire it.

**Ash:** I admire its purity, survival and close it by conscious or most contributions of morality  
[...] I can't lie about your chances, but... you have my sympathies.

(1:20:40—1:21:47)

Human beings are endowed with conscious and morality, unlike the Alien. The Alien is not even a flesh-eater, it either just kills its prey, or brings it to the Queen's lair so they can be fertilized by other facehuggers, giving birth to another Xenomorph. This monster is not just an animal, it has intelligence and thinks about the continuity of its own race.

Furthermore, in the second movie, the corporation also wishes to bring back alien life on Earth, but this time, the character of Carter J. Burke, a Weyland-Yutani Corporation representative, is hired to do the job, not an android like in the first movie. He promises Ripley, before going back on LV-42-, that the aliens will not be studied but destroyed, which is a lie regarding the firm's intentions in the first movie. Later in *Aliens*, Ripley discovers that Burke is responsible for the setting of the colony on this planet to get the alien to build bioweapons. He even tries to fertilize Ripley and Newt with a facehugger by locking them in a room with a facehugger but his plans ultimately fails.

Finally in the third movie, Ripley has an alien Queen embryo in her chest, and the corporation seizes by any means the opportunity to save the alien. At the end of the movie, she encounters the one who created the android Bishop of the second movie, who is also a member of Weyland-Yutani. The company dispatches a team to save Ripley, but she knows it is not for her but for the monster growing in her chest. The last minute of the movie concludes with the suicide of Ellen Ripley, jumping in the same position as the Christ Redeemer statue in the prison's foundry. This scene is going to be studied in the final section of this thesis to understand how Ripley becomes a figure of a martyr.

## **b) The Alien Queen in *Aliens***

- 1) Idea of birth and death. "Mandatory" to quote Betty Friedan on the duty to make babies- Ripley manages to communicate with the Queen with the flamethrower. Bargain in Motherhood

The question of motherhood is central and quite explicit throughout the *Alien* franchise. However, in *Alien* the imagery of motherhood, female fear, and 1950s America conformity can be put in parallel with the character of Ellen Ripley and the Alien Queen. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan highlights how the mystification of the female leads women to be mothers. Indeed, there is no obligation for women to have babies, however, Friedan explains that: If

[female teachers] were spinsters, if they had not had babies, they were forbidden by the mystique to speak as women. (Modern Woman: The Lost Sex would forbid them even to teach.) (Friedan 139) Giving up the desire to have children would mean giving up the mystification of the feminine, which would include giving up being a true woman and then being an outcast. Being a career woman with no children would mean that they are not a woman, and young women in the 1950s understood it.

There are these two mother figures in *Aliens*, who are similar because they are mothers, but also extremely distinct. On one hand, there is Ellen Ripley, a human being, mother of Amanda Ripley, a career woman who is also androgynous. The Alien Queen on the other hand, is a Xenomorph who is also a mother, however, her primary function is to lay eggs and protect her offspring. Both are mothers, yet they treat their children differently. One mother is a menace to the other. The Queen is a menace to Ripley and Newt since she is the one producing facehuggers who rape, and by extent create the Xenomorph, a creature that becomes a predator for humans and alters the food chain.

Ripley, who embodies human beings in general, becomes then a prey to the Xenomorph but has the ability to reverse this food chain by threatening the Queen. Indeed, at 2:08:15 in *Aliens*, Ripley is in the Queen's lair, facing the Queen with Newt on one arm, and the flamethrower on the other. Both mothers face each other, as if in a Western duel. As previously mentioned, the Queen represents the fear of castration, but she also embodies the mother who is just there to procreate, and then contribute to the continuity of patriarchy. With the flamethrower, Ripley threatens to burn the Queen's eggs if a Xenomorph is approaching too closely to them.

Hence, there are not only physical differences between Ripley and the Alien Queen as a mother. They both wish to protect their offspring; however, the Queen is nothing more than an egg-laying machine. The Alien Queen is just here to breed and stay at her place, as housewives in the 1950s were victims of the feminine mystique. As a housewife with male children, the Alien Queen waits in her lair to lay eggs. This concept of existing through the feminine mystique with only the purpose to make babies is profitable for the American patriarchal society. Nevertheless, Ellen Ripley is a multifaceted character, embodying the roles of a career woman, a final girl, and a mother simultaneously. As an androgynous final girl, she stands as an independent figure. However, it is noteworthy that she faces punishment in each film.

2) But Ripley sets everything on fire anyway. There is no such “motherhood” for her for an alien.

In *Aliens*, Ellen Ripley is confronted by the Queen in her lair. The Queen is surrounded by her eggs and as mentioned earlier, like a western duel, both mothers are facing each other. A deal is made between both mother figures, and Ripley, with her flamethrower, convinces the Queen that if she lets a Xenomorph attack Ripley and Newt, Ripley will set fire to every egg. The Queen realizes that; however, she lets one egg open. Ripley tilts her head and fires at the eggs, understanding that the Queen does not respect the contract with her. Many argue with different points of view, why Ripley burns the eggs. Hence, we can think that she burns the eggs for herself and for humankind.

On the personal front, the scene continues on Ripley, unstoppable, dumping all her wrath into those eggs. To bring Ripley to reason, even Newt needs to say, “Let’s go!” to leave the lair. Ripley ablazes the eggs since it is the fault of the Xenomorph species that she has not seen Amanda again and has thus broken her promise as a mother. After the events of the first movie, Ripley also has several nightmares, in which she sees herself have an alien bursting out of her chest. Torching the eggs may be a way for her to get rid of her nightmares by eliminating the Queen and her offspring.

After becoming a figure of a new Final Girl, Ripley also fits in the Angry Woman trope, where her feelings are fueled by wrath and cannot be stopped.

The angry woman is a rejection of societal expectations of feminine behavior, she is an expression of women’s collective cry for a revolution, a protest powerlessness, a call for change (Angry woman Trope)

When Ripley fires the eggs, she is reflecting her own powerlessness. She is powerless in the first, second and third movie against the Xenomorph, powerless against the company, and powerless towards her daughter Amanda since she breaks the promise to come back to Earth. At the moment Ripley is facing the Queen, she is owning her rage but channeling it against the Queen. Despite the bargain both mothers make, the Queen allows one facehugger to escape from its egg, and at this moment, Ripley realizes that there is no bargain possible, that this Queen is only a reproductive machine that produces bloodthirsty animals, that this alien is a threat to Ripley, Newt and by extension humanity. Moreover, “getting Angry is a necessary step to achieving justice” (*ibid*), as Ripley seeks justice, by punishing Weyland-Yutani for their

avarice and mass slaughter for their own good, as well as vengeance for their actions and behavior.

While in *Alien* she is a Final Girl, in *Aliens* she represents the trope of the Female Rage. Ripley also burns the eggs for humankind. Indeed, by burning the eggs, she endangers both her own and Newt's lives. Throughout the first two movies, she understands how dangerous the Xenomorph is for humanity as they are predators. Moreover, she understands that Weyland-Yutani wants to bring it back on Earth for research and bioweapons. Not only is the Xenomorph a menace, but if the company and the alien meet, all humankind is in jeopardy. Also, by destroying the eggs, Ripley is destroying the possible meeting between two patriarchal entities, indeed the will of Weyland-Yutani, and the monster itself which is a tool for patriarchy.

### **c) Women Fear and Guilt: The Career Woman's Fate and the Role of Females as Mothers.**

#### **1) *Alien* and *Aliens*, from final girl to mother**

As in many other franchises, we see an evolution of the main characters, and this is how some characters become more complex than the binary good versus evil. Ellen Ripley, as mentioned earlier, is what we can call a Final Girl. However, between the first *Alien* and the second *Aliens*, she is not portrayed the same. Indeed, she is a survivor in the first film, the last survivor of the Nostromo. However, in *Aliens* she is portrayed as more of a mother figure.

Among the rescue team in the colony on LV-426, we have marines and Ripley and Burke who are not from the army. When Ripley saves Newt for the first time, she embraces the role of a mother, especially a substitute mother for Newt. Indeed, no marines would have done that, taking care of a child, they are part of the army and are like sentinels, defenders, and rescuers. Ripley is back on LV-426 as an advisor and Burke, the lawyer of the company, after the communications with the colonists shut down. Hence, only Ripley and Burke are not part of the Marines. Why is Ripley the one taking care of Newt and not Burke for instance? Ripley is a mother; she knows how to take care of children, and how to talk to them. It is the first time we see Ripley that soft. Her mother's side softens her. When talking to adults, she is not afraid to confront others, to tell to others to listen to her. However, when she is with Newt, she is soft, calm, and selfless. Indeed, we have in *Alien* a strong woman, independent, ready to survive, doing her job, and cold-blooded. But in *Aliens*, she is still that strong woman, but as spectators

we have another perspective of Ripley, as a mother, who is this time ready to save Newt, even to walk into the Queen's lair, to put her own life in danger as a mother would do for her child.

There is also in *Alien*<sup>3</sup>, Ripley who is, despite her shaved hair and hence, without any feminine code, still a woman. She carries in her chest an embryo of a Queen Xenomorph. Even if the Xenomorph can be born out of a man, a woman, a child, or an animal (even mushrooms in *Alien: Covenant*), the parasitic Xenomorph is still in Ripley in the third movie which makes her a mother of the new Queen. What is different between the chestbuster of a Queen and a common Xenomorph is its symbolism. Ripley is ready to give birth to a monster that itself is going to give birth and this is how Xenomorphs work, only the Queen and the eggs procreate, the Queen is self-reproductive. Moreover, with her shaved head, it feels like Ripley herself is phallicized. As mentioned earlier, the Xenomorph has a phallic head, and so does Ripley after shaving her head. She has no choice but to do so, because of the lice problem in the prison, but also to blend with the community. However, the phallicization of Ripley makes her more androgynous, less feminine: her womanhood is hidden by becoming an inmate in a male prison, but she is still a woman, carrying a chestbuster in herself.

Thus, Ripley is a different character in each movie, however, in *Aliens* and *Alien*<sup>3</sup>, she is represented through the mother figure even though she still is an androgynous character. She is not reduced to her sex; however, she is largely shown to be a mother, and a survivor, setting her apart from other Final Girls in pre-*Alien* slasher films. She is in a sense a complex character, as well as a mother, a worker, a survivor, and a lieutenant.

## 2) Ripley and Maternal Guilt

In the *Alien* franchise, motherhood is central to the construction of the character of the Alien Queen and Ellen Ripley. However, the Queen is only a reproductive machine to procreate and assure the continuity of her race. On the other hand, Ripley has two children in the course of the franchise. Motherhood is a central theme in the second film.

First, there is Amanda Ripley, who is her biological daughter. Between the first and the second movie, Ellen was in a sleeping pod for 57 years. During this time, her daughter died of cancer two years before Ripley was awakened. Amanda married but died with no children. Ripley had promised her to be home for her 11th birthday.

Secondly, there is Rebecca Jorden, also known as Newt in *Aliens*. Her family has been sent on LV-426 by Weyland-Yutani, just like many other families. In the director's cut version, Newt's father is attacked by a facehugger as soon as they discover the same derelict ship of the

first movie. Ellen Ripley decides to protect Newt as if she were her biological daughter. In the last scene of *Aliens*, when the Queen is ejected into space, Newt even calls Ripley “Mommy”. However, at the beginning of the third film, Ripley’s pod crashes and Newt dies from drowning.

First Ripley faces guilt when she learns about the death of Amanda Ripley. Indeed, she has promised to return on time but does not do so. This can be linked to the idea that Ripley has left her home behind. The first film takes place in 2122, nearly 150 years after second-wave feminism in the United States. Therefore, the film presents a futuristic vision of how companies and working conditions might be in the future. In 2122, women seem equal to men: they are working, they are lieutenants like Ripley and pilots like Lambert and they also can be mothers. Motherhood and career are both things working together in 2122. We can observe the contrast of Ripley being at work, far away from home, which goes against what mothers were supposed to do in the 1950s under the feminine mystique. As one young wife told us: ‘I’m out of the house all day long, so I can’t prepare and serve meals the way I want to. I don’t like it that way—my husband and the children deserve a better break. (Friedan 194)

Housewives and mothers felt guilty not being there for their husbands and children as if being home was the only way a family could be well and prosperous. However, Ellen Ripley is what we can call a career woman. She is indeed working for a company where she is sent on ships where she is fed and housed, and when we learn that she promised Amanda to be back on her 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, we can assume that she can leave home for several days, weeks, months, or years. Ellen Ripley is indeed an independent working woman, a feminist figure, and a survivor, however, it feels like, as a mother, she abandoned Amanda unwillingly, that her fate is to not see her daughter again. It can be also compared to some sort of punishment for not being there for her, as leaving home for a woman is abandoning their mother role and by extension their children.

In *Aliens*, there is also the idea that Newt is a way for Ripley to be forgiven. Indeed, the character of Newt is approximately the same age as Amanda was when Ripley left to work. She is a traumatized 11-year-old girl, and Ripley, as soon as she meets Newt, protects her at all costs. She is overprotective and gives her a bracelet with a tracking device on it. Ripley does everything possible to keep Newt alive; she even goes to the Alien’s lair and faces the Queen to liberate Newt. However, at the beginning of the third movie, Newt has drowned during the crash of the pod. Ellen Ripley experiences what any mother fears the most, seeing her children die, and she does it twice. She feels guilty about Amanda and tries to redeem

herself with Newt but fails again; it is her fate to see her children die. Also, in the last scene of *Alien<sup>3</sup>*, Ripley kills herself and lets another of her “children” die. Ripley is in the same situation is in the fourth movie, *Alien: Resurrection*, when her half-Xenomorph and half-human baby is born, Ripley kills it.

3) *Alien<sup>3</sup>*, the fate of Ripley, no abortion possible, mandatory to give birth.



Figure 12: Ripley's suicide in *Alien<sup>3</sup>*, (02:11:50)

Redemption is “the act of saving or state of being saved from the power of evil; the act of redeeming” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary: Redemption). In *Alien<sup>3</sup>*, Ripley saves herself from the evil figure of the corporation and the alien. She saves herself from a painful death and she saves the entire humankind because she does not let the company have the power to bring the alien to Earth. In *Alien* she manages to survive alone from the bloodthirsty Xenomorph, in *Aliens*, she saves herself and other human beings and destroys the source of the problem, the Queen, and in *Alien<sup>3</sup>* she saves humankind. The repetition of saving others throughout the series, followed by her ultimate demise in the third movie, can be seen as evidence that Ripley is also a martyr of Weyland-Yutani. According to Robin Wood’s essay *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan and Beyond* “the strategy is to suggest that the evil represented by the Company is far worse since it places the entire human race in jeopardy” (Wood 337). Moreover, the idea of theology is far more present in the third movie than in the two previous ones. Indeed, Ripley ends up in a jail where prisoners pray and seek redemption for their acts. This jail is only occupied by men; when the prisoners know a woman has arrived in the prison, they even say that a woman in the penitentiary is “a violation of the harmony, a



potential break in the spiritual unit” (0:10:40) of the prisoners. Harold Andrews confirms also that “just because they’ve taken on religion doesn’t make them any less dangerous” (0:22:54) and adds that “it might be helpful if Lieutenant Ripley didn’t parade around in front of the prisoners as I’m told she did in the last hour” (0:21:45)

The presence of women in prisons is often seen as disruptive to the overall prison environment, leading to their unwelcome status in the penitentiary. Throughout the movie, she is more and more accepted by the prisoners. Indeed, she shaves her head, she adopts men’s features and because she is the one who has dealt with the Alien twice, she gains respect from the inmates. As soon as they see the Alien, they believe her, she is even called “Hey sister” (1:09:00) by the priest as being also a child of their God. However, towards the end of the movie, all the prisoners except Morse and Ripley meet their demise. It is Morse who accuses Ripley, blaming her for introducing the Alien to the prison at (01:10:27), stating that "she is the one that brought the fucker." We have a clear representation of Prometheus in the third film. This ancient Greek myth is about Prometheus who stole the fire from the Gods to give it to humankind to bring civilization and technological advancement. By doing so, he defies the Gods (Hubris) and was punished with his liver eaten by vultures every single day for eternity (Nemesis) followed by redemption (Catharsis). The following diagram compares scenes in *Alien*<sup>3</sup> that suggest Ripley embodies the Prometheus myth.

	Ripley
Hubris	By killing the Alien in the first movie, she kills this “perfect organism” (1:20:55) Ash said it was. Only a “perfect organism” can be created by a divine hand. She also defies the Gods by being the one and only survivor and trying to save the entire humankind.
Nemesis	By defying the Gods, she is punished to see the Alien every time she wakes up with nightmares, and seeing her loved ones (Newt, Amanda) being killed by time off by the monster itself. She is also facing the monster in every movie, as her fate is to meet it again and again.
Catharsis	She is not redeemed for what she has done. She kills herself and feels like she is finally at peace and breaks this vicious circle with her fate.

Gender can be compared with the Prometheus myth. Ripley is never and will never be a “conventional woman”, she is an androgynous character who has killed a monster by herself,

which has never been done before in a science fiction movie. She is punished for not conforming to the archetype of the feminine mystique of the 1950s and 1970s. She is in fact the one being punished. Indeed, not only do female characters die in these three films, but Ripley commits Hubris by refusing to let God punish her. God, in the Christian religion, is always gendered as “him”. We can then read Ripley’s fate as being punished by God, who is personified as a man, overseeing the society where the minorities, so women, are suffering from male privileges and their choice to put women into a weak position.

The Alien being a perfect organism could then be sent by God to punish mankind in general. But the one who is suffering the most is Ripley, by her Hubris she is not letting the Gods punish her for her defying the feminine mystique and other conventions men are expecting women to conform to.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this master's thesis is to examine how the first three movies of the *Alien* franchise depict women's struggles during second-wave and third-wave feminism. With the rise of feminist movements in the 1970s and the first release of *Alien* in 1979, both events can be viewed through a feminist lens. Over the course of a decade, the *Alien* franchise reimagined gender roles in science fiction. It provided a new perspective on female characters by rethinking the Final Girl trope and creating a new type of leading female character. No longer adolescent girls, but instead adults (and sometimes mothers), these women are in the forefront, winning, and surviving, against figures that serve patriarchy such as the Xenomorph and the Alien Queen.

The patriarchy in *Alien* is primarily represented through the Weyland-Yutani corporation. The company wants the alien to produce weapons, by extension the Xenomorph is a tool that serves the company, not to mention patriarchy in general, sacrificing human lives for military profit. In the first movie, this Xenomorph portrays women's fear in their own confined places. Ripley's life is jeopardized by her confinement in the *Nostromo*; she is left with only her paranoia and the Xenomorph chasing her. Just as Ripley struggles against being trapped in the *Nostromo*, so women in the 1950s who had to fight to step out of their homes and liberate themselves from what Friedan describes as a "comfortable concentration camp" (Friedan 254) where they lost their identity, and as in *Alien*, had to survive in it.

The franchise emphasizes both the fear of male and female genitalia. The alien reflects a great and complex new gender image, as being a nonbinary creature. The *Vagina Dentata* represents the fear of females in general, specifically their castrating nature. Males are frightened of being castrated by the Alien Queen who represents this matriarch, the housewife of the 1950s. In addition, Ripley represents the fear of women by being out of the feminine spectrum with her androgenicity.

Motherhood is a central theme in the franchise. Indeed, mothers are depicted as being monstrous, hence the term "Monstrous Feminine". Both mother figures of the Queen and Ripley have common points and differences. On one hand, we have the monstrous matriarch the Queen is embodying. This mother represents the conform 1950s housewives serving patriarchy by following what society wants at that time. On the other hand, Ripley represents the monstrous mother image by not fitting in what society expects women to and ends up being a martyr at the end of her journey.

Ripley ends up being the figure of the mother who cannot see her children and is deprived of all her children. She loses her biological child, Newt, as well as the unbearable Xenomorph in her chest. By committing the Hubris of stepping out of societal standards, Ripley is punished by being chased by the alien and losing her children, and the only redemption can be found in her death. By killing herself, she can crush patriarchy, however in the fourth film *Alien: Resurrection*, she is cloned by the company and removes the Alien Queen embryo out of her chest and finally reaches their goal. Thus, she destroys patriarchy on a small scale in the three first movies, however, on a larger scale, she remains a dummy of the company, which again uses Ripley, who is a victim of patriarchy.

Claudine Monteil, a friend of Simone de Beauvoir testifies that Beauvoir said:

Certes, Claudine, nous avons gagné, mais temporairement. Il suffira d'une crise politique, économique et religieuse, pour que les droits des femmes, nos droits, soient remis en question. Votre vie durant, vous devrez demeurer vigilante<sup>18</sup>.

Even though Ripley wins against patriarchy in each movie, the fourth one is a clear message that minorities should keep fighting for their rights, as Ripley, even after her death, is still facing company greed after being cloned. Ripley is a symbol of a feminist martyr, as most of the feminists in women's history suffer to gain rights.

The *Alien* franchise questions the relationship between one gender and another and the fear they both reflect; however other themes can be analyzed for further studies. Since in each *Alien* movie and even the prequels we have androids, and Ellen Ripley in the fourth movie *Alien: Resurrection* is cloned and no longer herself, posthumanism and gender can together be examined to go deeper with this study.

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<sup>18</sup> *Témoignage de Claudine Monteil - Événements - 2021 - Manifeste Des 343 : C'était Il y a Cinquante Ans - Assemblée Nationale*. <https://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/15/evenements/2021/manifeste-des-343-c-etait-il-y-a-cinquante-ans/temoignage-de-claudine-monteil>. Accessed 19 May 2023.

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