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ALIEN AUDIENCES

Remembering and
Evaluating a Classic Movie

**Martin Barker, Kate Egan,
Tom Phillips and Sarah Ralph**





Alien Audiences

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Alien Audiences: Remembering and Evaluating a Classic Movie

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ALIEN AUDIENCES

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2016 978-1-137-53205-3

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First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of Nature America, Inc., One New York Plaza, Suite 4500, New York, NY 10004–1562.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

ISBN 978-1-349-70910-6
E-PDF ISBN: 978-1-137-53206-0
DOI: 10.1057/9781137532060

Distribution in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world is by Palgrave Macmillan®, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

A catalogue record for the book is available from the British Library

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The project that drives this book has complicated origins. Its first incarnation was in an ambitious application by Martin Barker and Kate Egan to the British Arts and Humanities Research Council in May 2008. The idea for the project came from various things. First, we had long recognised the extent to which *Alien* had become a touchstone film for many academics. There have been endless debates about how to find meaning within it. One of us taught a first-year class using the film, whose title was ‘What do we do when film academics disagree?’ In other directions, we had watched developments within our field in reception studies (by which we understood the study of already-circulating reviews, debates, gossip, and the like), memory studies, and audience research. The proposal combined a substantial study of audience memories of watching *Alien* and an exploration of the film’s evolving status in various public domains, alongside a transatlantic investigation of its place within academia (in both teaching and research).

The bid failed. That happens. But there was something about one of the three referees’ reports that really bugged us. It basically asked: Why would anyone be interested in knowing about the audiences for a film like this? This was deeply frustrating. One of the grounds of the application, as it made very clear, was that not only had *Alien* been the topic of more than 100 academic analyses to date, but that very many of these analyses had structured within them claims about its possible role and influence on audiences. Apparently, it was alright for academics to make claims on

the basis of textual examinations of the film. It was not worth testing those claims in any way. The assumption we sensed behind this dismissal signalled a deep-going and troubling elitism – this was a ‘popular’ film, therefore of no academic value.

We are not claiming that that AHRC application was turned down solely because of that high culture-driven sneer – we cannot know what role that played. But when therefore several years later, four colleagues talked again about the topic, we agreed that – somehow, even if in a stripped-down version – we still wanted to try. By now, however, the motives for the project had grown, and each of the four people now involved brought different particular interests. Martin Barker brought both his general commitment to audience research and a growing realisation of the distinctiveness of very committed audiences. Kate Egan’s engagement in the project related, primarily, to her long-term interests in exploring the viewing histories of those with a fascination with, and an investment in, horror cinema. Tom Phillips was interested in the relationship of a single cultural product to fandom(s): how a prominent text could function simultaneously as part of the fannish experience of a number of different interest groups. Sarah Ralph’s motivation stemmed from a broader interest in how certain cultural products such as films – and the contexts in which they are viewed – embed in people’s long-term memories and are reconstructed and re-experienced in their present lives. Despite the differences in motivation, this has been a thoroughly collaborative project. The design of the questionnaire was the outcome of intense, happy debate among us. We shared the work of publicising our project, within the different avenues we each knew best. And we have shared the work of analysis. But because of those differing starting interests, writing has been distributed. Martin Barker wrote most of Chapters 1 and 2. Tom Phillips took responsibility for Chapter 3, Sarah Ralph for Chapter 4, and Kate Egan for Chapter 5. Chapter 6 was once again the outcome of deliberations among us. We hope, though, that we have done enough to ensure that the style and tone of the book is consistent throughout.

We have a number of people we need to thank. Thank you to Judith Barker for not protesting when Martin asked if he could spend some of their joint money to fund the project’s website. Kate Egan wishes to thank Stephanie Jones, Tim Noble and Lisa Richards for invaluable discussions about the chestburster sequence. Tom Phillips and Sarah Ralph wish to ‘thank’ the AHRC for turning down the original application, since that

gave them the opportunity to get on board with its reincarnation in 2012. We have been lucky to be able to call once again upon a web designer, Dave Gregory, with whom three of us had worked before on a number of occasions. Dave is not only a brilliant and thorough technical designer, he also has a strong feel for the kinds of research we are trying to do, and brought a simple but effective look to our website. We piloted the questionnaire with a number of people and learned some useful things from their beta-testing. When we were publicising the project, a number of webmasters – especially in the science fiction and horror domains – kindly carried our message inviting participants. Thank you to all of you. And of course a very particular thank you to the 1,125 people who took time – in some cases in great detail and at extraordinary length – to answer all our questions. We hope we have dealt fairly by all of you.

A good deal of our book hangs on quotations from our participants (and we much prefer that word to ‘respondents’). Our practice with quotations has been to correct, as a matter of courtesy, any obvious mistypings or misspellings of words. That aside, we have made sure that we present people’s words as they gave them to us. With every substantive quotation, we have given its unique identifier within our database. This is both so that readers can observe any repeated uses of the same person, and think about the connections across answers. It is also because we plan, from January 2018, to make the database available to other people – be they researchers, fans of the film, or indeed, people who contributed to our research – so that they can see for themselves what people told us.

September 2015

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The *Alien* Memories Project

Abstract: *Chapter 1 explains the background to and reasons for our project, and the story of the making of the film is briefly retold. It examines the extent to which Alien has become a point of reference and reuse within a wide range of kinds of popular culture. It also explores its highly unusual position within academic debates, and illustrates the role that claims and assumptions about ‘the audience’ play within these debates. The rationale for the design and methodology of our project is outlined, including a consideration of the role of specific kinds of cultural knowledge within this. A first summary of results is given, with particular attention to how our participants perceived and understood Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), and H. R. Giger’s alien.*

Keywords: academic debates; Ellen Ripley; Giger’s alien; Intertextual references; quali-quantitative survey.

Barker, Martin, Kate Egan, Tom Phillips and Sarah Ralph. *Alien Audiences: Remembering and Evaluating a Classic Movie*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

DOI: 10.1057/9781137532060.0005.

'Everyone remembers the first time'. So begins Ian Nathan's (2011) retelling of the making of Ridley Scott's (1979) film *Alien*. Of course that's not literally true – plenty of people would struggle to put flesh on their recall. But there's a deeper truth to Nathan's comment, which is reflected in the ways people talk about the film. A Google search on the phrase 'I remember watching *Alien*' yielded over 14,000 hits. People's memories of the film *matter* to them. But to get at that deeper truth, we have to ask some complicated questions – questions which could make sense of the differences between these two search results:

I saw the original *Alien* just after graduate school when it first came out knowing NOTHING about it. Scared the living bejeezus out of me and became one of my favorites of all time. (<http://www.prometheusforum.net/discussion/1/basic-info-introductions/p13>)

I remember watching *Alien* when I was about 10, but I wasn't too scared, then my dad sneezed and it echoed through the room and that's the scariest part I remember about that movie as a kid. (<http://chatabout.com/answers/first-movie-you-saw-in-theaters-that-you-remember>)

To do anything useful with memories as different as these requires some complicated research. This book tells the story of a research project undertaken to try to do just this: to gather people's memories of *Alien* in a way which could allow us to understand differences and see patterns. To do this, we have to unpack a lot of assumptions inside Nathan's remark. He presumes that the memory is equally important to everyone who saw the film. He presumes everyone is likely to remember particular things about the film – say, the notorious chestburster scene (rather than a dad's mighty sneeze ...). More trickily, he risks presuming that people will remember it *now* as they experienced it *then* – whenever that 'then' might have been (1979, on first release? 1993, after seeing one of the parodies? 2012, after *Prometheus*?).

Why *Alien*? The same questions could be asked of many films or indeed television series – and in a few cases, they have been (often, though, around their stars (see, for instance, Moseley, 2003) or around periods of film-going (see, for instance, Stacey, 1993)). Our reasons varied. But alongside its continuing importance to fans, Scott's film has attained a rather special position among critics and scholars. More than 100 substantial essays and books have examined the film in detail. But only rarely do these publications talk about their writers' actual experiences of the film. Instead, as we will see, they are prone to searching the film

for ‘deep meanings’ that might affect viewers without them even realising. In short, many of the publications about *Alien* were content to talk, without evidence, of what ‘the audience’ must be making of the film.

The Making of *Alien*

The story of the production has been well told by a number of people besides Nathan (e.g., Thomson, 1998; Sammon, 1999; Scott, 2001; Luckhurst, 2014), and we only briefly touch on it here. It is in many ways a standard Hollywood story, with an idea evolving to a script and screenplay over a long period, with many hands contributing along the way – and many more again making a difference to the shape of the final product. Beginning from a 1970 script outline titled *Star Beast* by Dan O’ Bannon, the idea was picked up by Ron Shusett, who had links with Fox. (Roger Luckhurst is excellent in recounting the various sources that O’ Bannon drew on, precursor ideas mainly from SF novels – he recalls that Fox had to settle out of court a claim from veteran SF writer A. E. van Vogt over use of ideas from his ‘Voyage of the Space Beagle’ stories.) At Fox, another player – Gordon Carroll – saw potential for a crossover with the horror genre. While in script development, Walter Hill at Brandywine Productions introduced the notion of adjusting the gender balance among the ship’s crew. Fox’s Sandy Lieberman, who had recently seen Ridley Scott’s *The Duellists* raised the idea of Scott directing. Scott came to the script on the back of having seen *Star Wars* and realising that he wanted to shift away from art house-style films. But perhaps (as David Thomson captures it) he retained something of that in a distinction he drew: he thought this could be more than horror film: it could be a film ‘about terror’ (Thomson, 1998: 10).

Once confirmed as director, Scott was introduced by O’ Bannon and Shusett to the work of Swiss artist H. R. Giger, and was completely taken by some images of aliens from his *Necronomicon*. This chimed with Scott’s discovery of heavy metal (metal hurlant) as an aesthetic attitude and style. Alongside these came the introduction of a ‘grubby aesthetic’ from Ron L. Cobb, from whose hands came the image of the spaceship as a ‘tramp steamer’. Scott reinforced the gender interest by pressing for Ripley, the ultimate survivor, to be a woman – and then both screen testing and casting Sigourney Weaver (for the princely sum of \$33,000) – against the wishes of Fox. The film’s budget rose gradually from a preliminary

\$1M to an eventual \$9M, and was shot in the UK in 1978. It was given a slow, somewhat nervous release by Fox (who worried that the film would be found too visceral and scary). But from slow beginnings, and running over into 1980, the film's receipts proved they had a hit on their hands. And it became a classic reference point for discussion, not only among many individuals, but also in other forms of popular culture.

Alien's invasion

Albert: They're a bit like Facehuggers, aren't they?

The Doctor: Face... huggers?

Albert: Yeah, you know. *Alien*. The horror movie, *Alien*.

The Doctor: There's a horror movie called *Alien*? That's really offensive. No wonder everyone keeps invading you.

'Last Christmas', *Doctor Who*. BBC1, 25 December 2014.

The above exchange, taken from a *Doctor Who* Christmas special episode, occurs when a scientist remarks to The Doctor the similarities of a set of attacking alien creatures ("dream crabs") to *Alien's* Facehugger. Even without such specific acknowledgement, these similarities may have already been evident to those familiar with the imagery of *Alien* and, indeed, dream crab designer Rob Mayor has acknowledged the influence on its design, noting 'I can't lie, [*Alien*] was a reference, but it's such a classic film that as soon as you have spider-like creatures running around attaching them to people's faces, you can't help but make that comparison' (Holmes, 2015). Yet despite the design similarities between the creatures, the dialogue's explicit reference to *Alien* – the casual acknowledgement of the concept of such a thing as a Facehugger – hints at the extent to which *Alien* has pervaded popular culture. That such stark reference was made to a film some 35 years after its initial release, in a prime time scheduling slot on Christmas Day, to a viewership comprising nearly a third of the audience share (BBC News, 2015), constitutes an acknowledgement of *Alien's* continuing power and relevance. How can we account for its persistent inclusion in the popular cultural landscape?

Take *Spaceballs* (1987), for example. Released eight years after *Alien*, Mel Brooks' sci-fi parody features a scene in which John Hurt – reprising his role as Kane – once again falls victim to a chestbuster during dinner,