Aliens: Crash Course Film Criticism #2

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=VoZMOmjXENU
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/VoZMOmjXENU

While it's easy to love a straight-up superhero movie or car chase flick, not all films fit neatly into one genre. Take the *Aliens* series, for instance. You've got some sci-fi thriller movies with action and horror elements thrown in, and not to mention, a protagonist who arguably helped pioneer the trope of a strong female character. In this episode, we're going to focus on the second film in the series, James Cameron's *Aliens*, a theatrical cut, not the extended special edition. With its carefully crafted plot points and ensemble cast of characters, this sci-fi action classic rewards a deeper look. On one hand, you can think about *Aliens* as a war movie, and unpack the battle between human marines and vicious aliens through a racial and cultural lens, whether or not that's what Cameron intended. Or, you can look at it as an action movie and analyze Ellen Ripley as a hero through a feminist lens, because her character is part of what's really special about this film, both for fans and historically in cinema. I'm Michael Aranda, and this is CrashCourse Film Criticism.

[Intro Music]

The original *Alien* came out in 1979. Directed by Ridley Scott, it's slow, methodical, and spooky- a horror movie in space; whereas, *Aliens* is a different kind of film, and intense war movie, in space. The first *Alien* film starred Sigourney Weaver as Ellen Ripley, a space trucker whose crew responds to a distress call that brings them to LV-426, a desolate planet with an alien life form that incubates inside humans. Through her smarts and tenacity, Ripley survives, blows the alien into space, and seals herself into a hyper-sleep pod with her cat, Jones. Because *Alien* straddles the science fiction and horror genres, Ripley's sort of a combination of an action hero and the "final girl" movie trope. The term "final girl" was first used by the film scholar Carol J. Clover to describe a pattern in slasher movies. A typically virginal woman tends to be the only survivor of a killer's murdering spree, fights them, and lives to tell the story. And James Cameron's *Aliens* picks up her story later, 57 years later. Ripley is found by a salvage ship and brought back to Gateway Station near Earth. She has to defend herself in a room full of suits for destroying a ship while fighting an alien she can't prove existed, which doesn't go well.

[Scene from *Aliens*]
Ripley: "But I'm telling you that those things exist."
Van Luen: "Thank you Officer Ripley, that will be all."
Ripley: "Please, you're not listening to me"

So, she gets demoted and is forced to workin a loading dock. Eventually, the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, a sinister conglomerate also known as The Company, asks her to be a consultant on a military expedition that's being sent back to LV-426. Now, there's a colony there that, surprise, they've lost contact with. Suffering from PTSD, Ripley rejects their request, following the pattern of most characters on a hero's journey, but she eventually agrees to go back, feeling a special duty to protect any survivors and eradicate the aliens, and enemy no one knows better than she does.

[Scene from *Aliens*]
Ripley: "Just tell me one thing, Burke. You're going out there to destroy them, right? Not to study, not to bring back, but to wipe them out."
Burke: "That's the plan. You have our word on it."
Ripley: "All right, I'm in."

These become the two instincts that most define her as a character: the drive to protect and the duty to kill.

The basic plot is similar to the original film; the aliens get loose, people run, and most of the marines die in a lopsided fight early in the film's second act. But, after an intense battle with the alien queen, Ripley survives, along with her found family: a surrogate daughter named Newt, who's the only surviving colonist, a Corporal named Hicks, and an android named Bishop.

The plot of *Aliens* came from the brain of James Cameron. He was given the opportunity to write a treatment by 20th Century Fox producers David Giler and Walter Hill on the strength of his original *Terminator* script. His treatment hit every note they hoped for in a sequel, so he was given 18 million dollars and sent to Pinewood Studios in England to make it. The British film crew buckled under Cameron's exhaustive shooting schedule and inexperience. Cameron had guerrilla filmmaking expectations, where 12 hour days were normal to finish projects on time and under budget. The 1st A.D. even led a revolt against Cameron that was eventually put down by producer Gale Ann Hurd and effects guru Stan Winston. After the movie was finished, it had massive success, with a worldwide gross of 130 million dollars off the original 18 million dollar initial investment. Plus, the awards and accolades piled up, from Oscar nominations to wins for visual effects and sound effect editing. Aliens is now considered a seminal classic in sci-fi, horror, and 80s pop culture. Its structure and themes are incredibly effective and stand the test of time.

You can look at the original *Alien* as a haunted house film set on a spaceship. Ripley was the lone survivor after her companions were picked off one-by-one by a horrific alien monster. The same as any *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th* film, really. But, *Aliens* takes the basic elements in a different direction. It's more of an action or war movie, where a squad of marines is pitted against a squad of aliens. Rogert Ebert wrote of *Aliens* in his 1986 review, "...when I walked out of the theater, there were knots in my stomach from the film's rollercoaster ride of violence." He gave it a thumbs up, but also couldn't really recommend it. So, it's intense, at least for 1986.

Cameron has said that the marines in this film were meant to parallel a group of American army soldiers toward the end of their tour in the Vietnam era. He wanted to make it feel like a gritty, realistic expedition. With a fairly tight budget, he used story elements, like the beeping motion-tracker, to build tension. Like the shark in *Jaws*, sometimes not seeing the monster is even scarier. It's classic horror storytelling!

[Scene from *Aliens*]
Hudson: "Six!"
Ripley: "That can't be. That's inside the room!"
Hudson: "It's readin' right, ma'am. Look!"

Not to mention, he didn't have to spend money he didn't have on huge swarms of alien creatures. Cameron also says he was trying to show how cockiness and over-reliance on technology can bring about the downfall of large military institutions. And, it's true that his space marines are basically a tool of The Company, and don't come off so well. He mentions how Americans' advanced weapons didn't matter in the Vietnam war, because they didn't understand how to fight their low-tech but very stealthy and determined enemy.

But, whether or not Cameron intended this, painting both military adversaries and other races as savage aliens in not uncommon in media. Especially, when you look at texts through a cultural or racial critical lens. There are lots of examples of narrative fiction where aliens are described as faceless, dangerous enemies which are pitted against our usually white, western-coded heroes. During the Cold War, for instance, alien invasion was a common plot point in sci-fi and horror in the United States. Think of films like *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which really struck a nerve at the time. People were afraid of foreign invaders sneaking into our society, attacking us, and robbing us of our identities and way of life.

Other aliens in fiction are much more primitive than humans. Think

of *A Princess of Mars*, which was adapted into the film *John Carter*, or even James Cameron's later film, *Avatar*. These aliens can be seen as stereotypical portrayals of non-white racial others, especially native peoples. And, they usually either end up fighting the heroes or depending on them to swoop in and save their troubled societies.

So, by one interpretation, Cameron's choice to compare his vicious aliens to the Vietnamese army makes this another film that parallels xenophobia in the real world. And, even though his main intent was to criticize The Company, and he might not have been trying to make a racial commentary, it's definitely worth looking at the way *Aliens* and many other sci-fi and horror stories portray alien enemies.

Now, despite *Aliens* being a gritty war movie, the camaraderie and one-liners from the marines are part of what make the film so memorable and entertaining.

[Scene from *Aliens*]
Hudson: "Man, get it on! You know it!"

Another huge part of that is the setups and payoffs in the screenplay. You can think of *Aliens* as a series of well-crafter chain reactions. "A" leads to "B" which leads to "C." There's always a reason for what's happening on screen. By today's standards, these plot points might be a little bit obvious, but by planting ideas that will come back around, Cameron lets us anticipate and appreciate his cohesive vision for the story. For instance, because the compound is basically a big bomb, the marines dump all their high-tech bullets into Private Frost's baf and are told to only use flamethrowers. But, when the aliens attack, Frost is accidentally set on fire and the satchel explodes, killing another marine and leaving the survivors with very little ammo. Or, like when Farrow, the pilot, doesn't let her co-pilot explain that something's wrong. Then, an alien gets on board and kills her, so the drop ship crashes. This strands our heroes, damages the compound-- which is a big bomb, as we already know-- and forces a ticking clock that motivates everyone for the rest of the film.

Overall, a lot of Cameron's setups and payoff work to build up Ellen Ripley's character, especially her humanity and heroism. She's at the heart of the film, and at the heart of her story is love, which is one of Cameron's self-proclaimed favorite themes to explore. And, that's really unusual for an action movie. Like, lots of action-packed stories revolve around traditionally masculine ideals. There are beefy cars and gear-heads in films like *The Fast and the Furious*, or brooding old men in movies like *Logan*. Things like anger, vengeance, and power tend to be at the center of conflicts.

Now, in the *Alien* series, power is still a major theme, but partially because these movies ultimately focus on a female hero, it's interesting to unpack them through a feminist critical lens. There have been countless essays written about the *Alien* franchise from this critical perspective, like how the aliens could represent fears of sexual power, rape, or female reproduction. One of the most horrifying parts of these movies is also what Ripley has nightmares about: humans are violated and essentially become pregnant with aliens, which ultimately kill them. Like, the face-hugger aliens implant babies into human chest, which incubate and burst out in bloody explosions. Plus, I mean, it's a penis. Just look at it.

So, throughout the first film, Ripley can be seen as a version of the maiden archetype, a damsel-in-distress running from a horrible monster. She fits right into the "final girl" movie trope, where the last woman standing goes from helpless victim to defeating the murderer. By the time *Aliens* happens, Ripley is a traumatized action hero, who is haunted by alien implantation and chest-bursting gore-- a very specific kind of violence. A sense of duty compels her to return to LV-426 and fight the aliens, but when she discovers Newt on the base, protectiveness becomes an even bigger motivator. You immediately get the sense that Newt becomes her surrogate daughter, and that the force of motherly love is powerful. It compels Ripley to survive in the compound and fight off the aliens, not only for herself and the marines, but for this young girl.

So, in a way, Ripley transitions from the maiden archetype in *Alien* to the mother archetype in *Aliens*. Her character is allowed to be feminine, and embrace the idea of motherhood and family, but she's not excessively weak or emotional or made to be the butt of a joke. This perfectly sets up Ripley and the alien queen in direct conflict: two mothers, both protective of their children, and they're locked in combat because their goals are in opposition. That's very basic, but also very effective screenwriting. And, it leads us to one of the ultimate payoffs of the film: Ripley getting into the power loader suit to fight off the queen. This is Cameron planting the seeds for the climax of the movie, when Ripley's skill is the key to protecting her newfound family, Newt and an injured Corporal Hicks. As Ripley yells,

[Scene from Aliens]
Ripley: "Get away from her you [jerk]!"

We're all cheering for her and the strength of motherly love. And, audiences weren't the only ones cheering. Sigourney Weaver was nominated for the 1987 Oscar for Best Actress for this role, an honor that hadn't been given to an action movie heroine before. And, it was for a protagonist motivated by love for her found family. So, you've got to give *Aliens* some credit, whether you appreciate it as a well-constructed sci-fi classic or for Ellen Ripley's impact on female heroes in decades to come. But, it's also a great example of using film criticism to look at genre-transcending stories in multiple ways, which directors may or may not have intended.

Next time, we'll talk about the critically-acclaimed *Selma*, a historical drama film about the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the role that media can play in shaping our idea of what actually happened in the past.

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[Outro Music]