

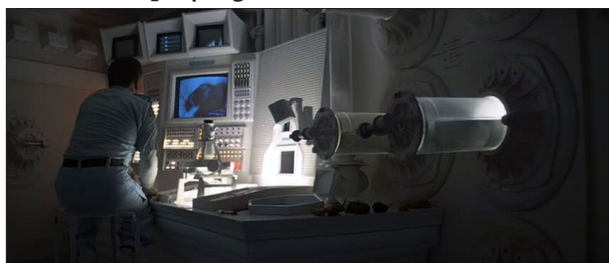
Why This Applying of Limiting, *Alien* Categorisation?

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Over the past fortnight or so, I've finally got around to watching the *Alien* series of films, none of which I had ever seen before*, because just prior to Christmas I picked-up the "Alien Quadrilogy" box-set of the four films. I watched them through once on their own, then once more with the Audio Commentary tracks switched-on, so as to get a richer sense of the story-telling background that went into the decisions which resulted in the final versions of the films (plus I'm just that sort of obsessive, trivia-buff who loves hearing film directors slag-off the heads of studios who insist on things being made badly in order to keep to an arbitrarily determined budgetary figure).

The end result of my watching the films was a mixture of admiration for Sigourney Weaver's talents as an actress playing the same role four times in entirely different ways; a deeper understanding of the effect different directorial styles have on a story; and a question that continues to burble around in my mind which has prompted this posting.



Scene from *Alien*; introducing the "Science Labs Are Way-Cool" theme

Why is the publishing world filled with such narrow views of story types?

At some point through the four films, I tried to determine the type of film I was watching, and decided it was an SF, Horror, Thriller, and Action film. The various entries in the saga mix those up in different proportions,

but – ultimately – they are all four of those at some point in each of them.

Alien (the first one) begins as an SF film as we watch people wake-up from 'hyper-sleep' and then land on a planetoid in response to a beacon. There, we continue with the SF theme with the discovery of odd egg-like things and poor John Hurt is carried back to the ship. Once he has his stomach explode (which is a bit of an odd thing for an otherwise very polite person to do at the dinner table, I might add), we shift into 'Horror/Monster' mode, and start searching for the little lizard-like thing around the ship.

Now that we have a residence / working area hiding an un-known monster, we've also introduced the plot device of 'The Haunted House' where everyone tries to locate the 'other being' – typically a ghost or ghoul, but here is a space-based one – while we in the audience keep shouting "It's right behind you!" like we're watching some Christmas Pantomime. After trying to destroy the thing using a variety of military techniques – thereby introducing the 'Thriller' and 'Action' genres – the important thing to do is to get the heck out of here, which reduces the victory required from "destroy all monsters" to a simple goal of



Scene from *Alien*; introducing the "Haunted House" theme

* Stop looking at me like that! Yes, it's true. Honestly! Listen, have you seen *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, *The Third Man*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Touch of Evil*, and *Lawrence of Arabia* so often you can quote huge chunks of dialogue from them verbatim? Well I can, because while you were watching the "Alien" series, I was committing those other ones to memory. Right; are we okay now? Good.



Scene from *Aliens*; introducing the
“Children Are Helpless” theme

‘haunted’, then that we cannot truly conquer the ‘other’, the characters must get out alive. Complexities of situation get in the way of that, obviously, and so things crash, ways through danger are blocked, risks are taken, and the little orange stripy cat is replaced by a little dirty-faced girl. The monsters are larger and more numerous; however the weapons are stronger and more advanced. Yet the same balance exists: monsters are wiler than the guns. In the same way, our ‘defenceless complexity’ is seemingly more important for she is human now instead of feline.

*Alien*³ (that’s the third one, obviously) provides all of this, but makes things trickier. The enemy is though gone by Ripley, but she needs to make sure after crash-landing in mysterious circumstances on a maximum security jail planet. Once she’s determined the monster exists, she then has to convince others that the thing exists and is as dangerous as she avers. This time, there is only the one monster, but there are no weapons to speak of, so we have a battle of wits betwixt the group of criminals^{*} she’s won over to her cause, and the complex’s various hallways and storage rooms, and ultimately its lead works. After trapping the beast once, only to have it let out again[†], the next plan is to get the thing into a mould and drown it in molten lead.

Meanwhile, a second ‘evil’ is on its way to the planet: the Corporation wants to preserve this dangerous creature and study it in order to create their own ‘biological weapon’ in the form of a living, killing machine. We had a taste of that in the second and first films, but it was only a plot point and was never manifested in any sort of imminent fashion. Now, the people who need ‘rescuing’ – in the way we had the cat and child previously – are everyone we see, but the ‘cavalry coming over the hill in the nick of time’ are shadowy Men in Black, who may save our heroes, but at the cost of technology trumping safety by letting evil live to fight another day. Morality plays and Biblical questions of “what is the ultimate right”, as well as philosophical questions of “whose interests are best served by this or that plan of action”, are all invoked by the time we see the credits roll. But, just in case we didn’t



Scene from *Alien*³; introducing the
“We Are Tiny in Thy Sight” theme

have enough religious symbolism of ‘pure, cleansing fires of death’ and ‘the fires of Hell contain much evil’ already, Ripley’s – believe it or not[‡] – sacrifice is made doubly-meaningful as she kills both herself and the foetal

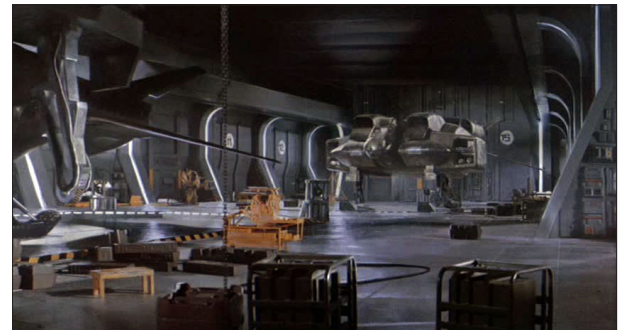
* Inevitably referred to as ‘a rag-tag bunch of men that society has rejected...’ etcetera...

† Yes, the ‘work-print’ version that David Fincher originally wanted; it’s got better tension, really

‡ Sorry... couldn’t resist

“get out of here alive”. Throughout the film, the defenceless cat is seen as ‘that which must be saved’, because otherwise everyone would have a much easier time of the whole thing.

Aliens (the second film), introduces the same sort of elements with the added attraction of it being 57 years later, our heroine being frozen in sleep for that period, thus introducing a bit of ‘time travel’ which we’ll very much see later on. This film has a huge reliance on ‘military action movie’ due to the involvement of the unit of Marines who accompany Ripley to the now peopled planetoid we saw in the first film. Again, once we determine the ‘house’ is



Scene from *Aliens*; re-introducing the
“Space-Ships are Cool!” theme

alien she is carrying; but she swan-dives into the forge, dying so that others might live, visually screaming her messianic purpose so loud only the blind and deaf might miss it.

I watched *Alien Resurrection* the same day as *Alien*³ simply because my only thought was “how in blazes do they get her to return?” Here, we have a lighter tale, cover the same ground as the previous films, and toss a bit of humour into the mix. The other major thematic element is “does knowledge and science trump all other concerns?” We get a bit of that with the story in the book of “Genesis” in *The Bible* with ‘The Tree of Knowledge’ being something humanity is forsworn to partake of. Here we have a sort of warning about what might happen if we irrevocably make that mistake.

Science has taken Ripley’s blood, left just prior to her death, and re-constituted both her and the Little Alien Child within her.⁵ The various previous attempts are viewed in a lab, and Ripley commits a sort-of suicide by destroying the failed experiments. “Science does bad things” comes the warning here.



Scene from *Alien Resurrection*; introducing the “They’re Slimy, But They’re Smart!” theme

So... what’s my damned point, then?

Without ever seeing these films before, or even hearing much about them other than *what do you mean ‘you haven’t seen them?’*, it’s possible to find instances of the SF, Horror, Thriller, Action, Western, Judæo-Christian Dogma, and Haunted House plot elements. Not only are ‘Noble Warrior’, ‘Dangerous Other’, and Plato’s questions of ‘what is “good-ness” and “right-ness”?’ thrown in for good measure, there’s also the recurring question of “if you destroy or create a human-like robot, have you destroyed or created a life?” It all works, too!

Why, then, given that we can all agree that novels can contain far more complexity than any movie will, do we have to limit the number of influences and thematic threads to that some nit-wit in a corner office – who like as not hasn’t bothered to read the book – can slot it into the ‘horror’, ‘thriller’, or ‘general fiction’ slots in their marketing campaign?

Please do comment below here, and tell me why the lines of published fiction are categorised upon release when the initial distribution of films are free of these content labels?

Given the above, I don’t understand why it’s done.



Scene from *Alien*³; introducing the “Guess the Symbol” theme

From here on we have a fairly straight-forward *shoot ‘em up* style of tale, with an ending filled with another dose of “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few... or the one”, as we had before. Here, we have extra-added joy of watching a mother – or ‘God’ and/or ‘Creator’, if you will – destroy her child – or ‘give of her only-begotten son’, in a sense – so that humanity might be rid of an evil.



Scene from *Alien Resurrection*; introducing the “Who Are We to Create Life?” theme

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* Thankfully, they never attempt to create an answer to the question *how do you do that, exactly?*