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Allowing ‘Us Just to LIVE There’: Atmosphere and Audience Evaluations of the *Alien*

Film Series

Kate Egan

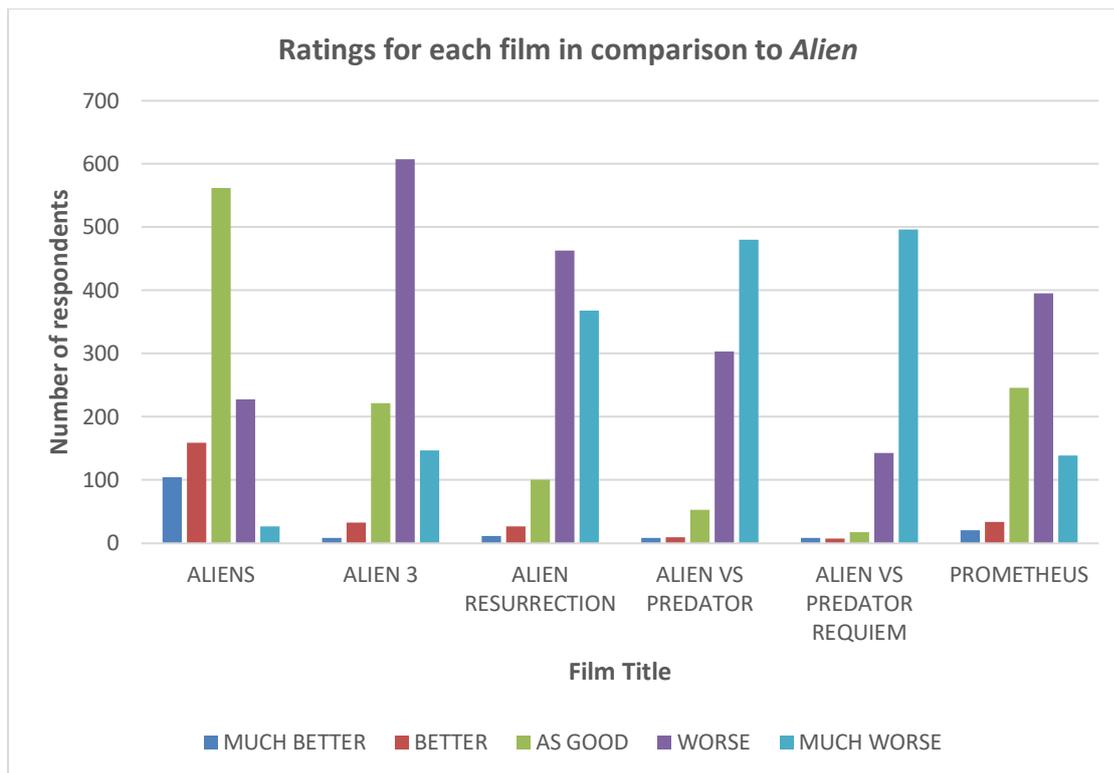
Abstract

This chapter focuses on an analysis of responses to the *Alien* sequels, gathered as part of the 2012-15 *Alien Audiences* international audience project. Drawing on key discourses employed in these responses, this chapter will explore the significance of atmosphere, mood and tone as a set of evaluative criteria employed by many respondents to measure consistency and continuity (as well as difference) across the film series, and the ways in which this can allow audiences to excuse flaws of plot and characterisation within particular *Alien* films, in particular, the franchise’s troubled third instalment, *Alien 3* (1992). The chapter will draw on Robert Spadoni’s analysis of the textual employment of atmosphere within particular horror films, as well as key arguments from Mark J. P. Wolf on world-building, in order to consider how this critically prized but ‘nebulous’ – and to date still relatively under-theorised – ‘thing we call atmosphere’ can serve as a key anchor for invested audiences of the *Alien* series (Spadoni 2014, 111). Allowing audiences, through this form of engagement, to foreground evaluative criteria which maintains the franchise’s perceived strong relationship with highbrow horror and genre production.

In 1999, Will Brooker explored the sequels and licensed spin-offs associated with *Star Wars* (1977), *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Alien* (1979), and the ways in which they were evaluated within emergent internet fan communities of the time. In this regard, Brooker noted the distinctiveness of the *Alien* film franchise, each instalment having been ‘under the command not just of a different director but of a different *auteur*; each with a highly distinctive personal style’, meant that the *Alien* series exhibited a marked ‘openness to diverse authorial styles’ (1999, 62, 64). As fans observed Ripley being ‘flung’ across the series ‘from one aesthetic and generic universe to another’, they therefore evaluated the *Alien* franchise in a particularly open and flexible manner, with the ‘respective qualities’ of each film in the series, as well as its transmedia spinoffs, being ‘entirely open to debate’ (1999, 53, 63). However, findings from the 2012-15 *Alien Audiences* international audience project complicate this notion that audience evaluations of the *Alien* series are always as open and flexible as Brooker’s analysis suggests. The primary focus of the *Alien Audiences* project (designed and conducted by Martin

Barker, Tom Phillips, Sarah Ralph and myself) was to gather people's memories of the original 1979 film, as its fortieth anniversary drew near. We were interested in asking audiences about 'how they found meanings in the film, and how they constructed those meanings', what 'different kinds of viewers notice and attend to in the film, what kind of a film' they 'believe it to be', but also—crucially, for the purposes of this chapter—what 'they relate and compare it to' (Barker et al. 2016, 9).

In order to try to garner responses that could shed light on this latter issue, we asked the following two questions in our project's online questionnaire: firstly, 'which of the other *Alien*-connected films have you watched? And how would you rate each of them in comparison with the original film?' [multiple choice/quantitative question]; and, secondly, 'can you say what lies behind the comparisons you've just made?' [free text/qualitative question]. The film options given included the two *Alien vs. Predator* films, and Ridley Scott's return to the *Alien* storyworld, *Prometheus* (2012). At the time the project was conducted, *Alien: Covenant* (2017) was yet to be released. The results, from the 1125 people who completed our project questionnaire are given in the chart below.

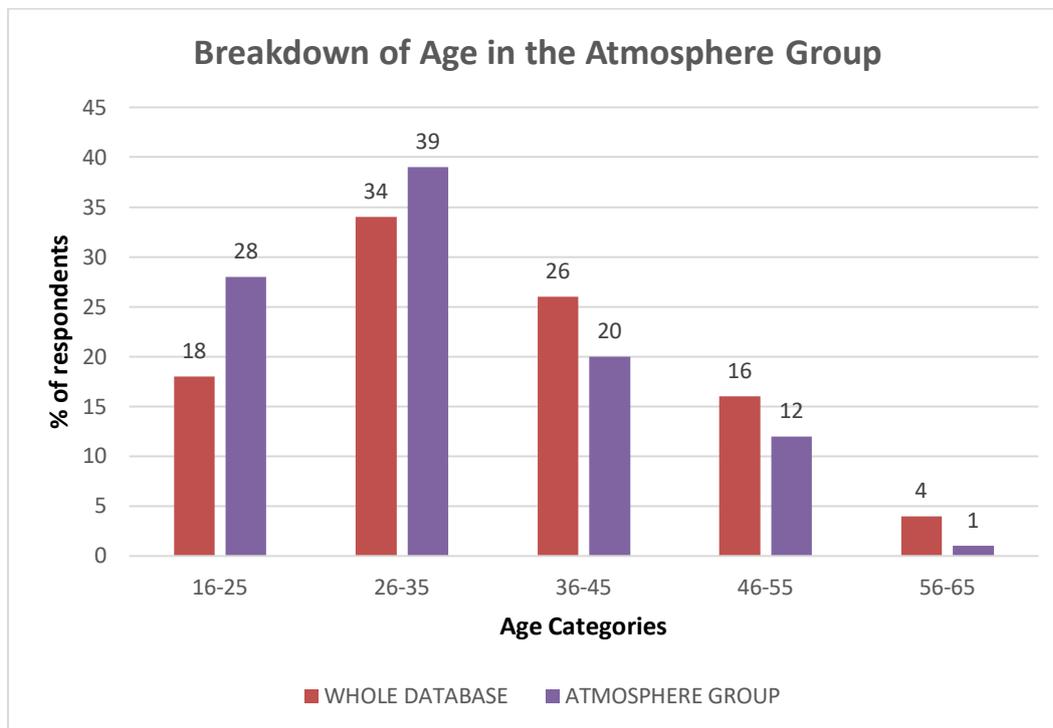


In *Alien Audiences: Remembering and Evaluating a Classic Movie*, the book based on our overall project findings, we only had space to note the main and most obvious reading of these results, that there is ‘in general a descending scale of ratings of the other films in the franchise’ (Barker et al. 2016, 14). While there are a substantial number of respondents (264 people, 23%) who rated *Aliens* (1986) more highly than the original film, and another 562 people (50%) who rated *Aliens* as being ‘as good as’ *Alien*, there is a ‘steady decline in ratings’ across the other five films in the series (Barker et al. 2016, 14).

By going back to these findings, however, I wanted to consider on what basis such ratings were being made, particularly in light of the fact that, *Aliens* aside, these results and quantitative patterns seemed to contradict Brooker’s 1999 findings that fans of the series were more flexible and open when assessing the ‘respective qualities’ of each film in the franchise. In order to do so, I began to explore respondent answers to Question 9 in the project questionnaire, the qualitative question which asked, ‘can you say what lies behind the

comparisons you've just made?' This exploration was informed by two issues, in particular. Firstly, and as outlined in the *Alien Audiences* book, the rationale behind our use of paired quantitative and qualitative questions in the questionnaire was to allow us 'to discover patterns, connections, separations and oppositions' within audience responses, while 'getting people to flesh out their distinctive involvements in *their own preferred terms*' (Barker et al. 2016, 10, my emphasis). Consequently, I wanted to explore further what specific preferred terms, concepts and discursive frameworks were being employed by audiences to evaluate the other films in the *Alien* series in relation to the original *Alien* film. Was the focus on the extent to which the rest of the *Alien* series could be perceived to be part of the canonical *Alien* story, as it was for the fans analysed in Brooker's account; or were other criteria also being employed and foregrounded in these audience evaluations? Secondly, when first reading through respondent answers to Question 9, I had been struck that some respondents had challenged the range of terms we had used (in particular, the terms 'worse' and 'much worse') for the multiple-choice options to Question 8, the quantitative question asking for ratings of the sequels in comparison to the original film. For instance, respondents remarked, in their answers to Question 9, that: 'I don't like the term "worse". Although I don't think they [the other *Alien* films] are as *atmospheric* and cinematographically beautiful, I still love them very much', and 'I don't think the other films are "worse" than the original, just different in *tone* and ultimately not as good' [#393, female, 26-35; #136, male, 16-25, my emphasis]. For me, this seemed to shed light on the ways in which respondents might distinguish the rating 'worse'—selected by 54% of respondents as their comparative rating of *Alien 3* (1992), for instance—from the alternative option 'much worse', particularly when thinking, relatively, about the extremely high esteem in which the majority of our respondents held *Alien*, with 82% of our overall project respondents having rated the original film as either a 'masterpiece' or 'excellent'.

As illustrated in the two Question 9 responses given above, an element that seemed to reoccur across a substantial number of responses (91 people, 8% of responses) were references to atmosphere, mood or tone when comparatively evaluating the *Alien* sequels in relation to the original 1979 film. It should be noted that, while the overall project dataset had far more male than female responses (76% male as opposed to 24% female), this was even more pronounced amongst this group of ninety-one responses (86% male as opposed to 14% female), suggesting that this form of appreciation and evaluation of *Alien* may be particularly prevalent amongst male fans of the series. In addition, and as illustrated in the chart below, there were significantly higher numbers of younger respondents in this group, with, for instance, 28% of this “atmosphere group” being between the ages of 16 and 25 at the time of data-gathering (10% higher than the dataset as a whole) and 39% being 26-35 (5% higher than the dataset as a whole), a finding that I will return to later in this chapter.



For Julian Hanich and Robert Spadoni—two key scholars who have critically analysed “atmosphere” and its employment, particularly in horror films—film academics have critically

neglected the term atmosphere, the way in which it has been historically employed in film criticism to evaluate horror films, and its status as a key formal element employed within horror cinema across its history. As Spadoni argues, '[w]hat the word means has been mostly taken for granted, and what it has to teach us about how horror films cohere and how they affect viewers remains poorly understood' (2014a, 152). Through an analysis of how audiences draw upon and understand cinematic atmosphere across these ninety-one responses, this chapter will focus on this last element identified by Spadoni, that is, the affect and impact of atmosphere on audiences, but it will also significantly expand on Spadoni's arguments, by exploring how audiences (rather than the film critics Spadoni analyses) *employ* a term like atmosphere and related terms such as 'mood' and 'tone' as a key evaluative criterion to measure continuity, as well as difference and distinctiveness, across the *Alien* film series. The chapter will, in particular, explore two key ways in which atmosphere is seen, by these respondents, to be used effectively across the series (and particularly in the original film)—firstly, to generate dread, tension and unease, and, secondly, to support and sustain an immersive storyworld. Throughout, the chapter will draw on Julian Hanich and Robert Spadoni's analysis of the textual employment of atmosphere within particular horror films, as well as key arguments from Mark J. P. Wolf on world-building, in order to consider how this critically prized, but 'nebulous', 'thing we call atmosphere' (Spadoni 2014b, 111) can serve as a key anchor for invested audiences of the *Alien* series, allowing them to foreground evaluative criteria which connects to the original *Alien* film's relationship with highbrow horror production.

The Alien Series and Atmosphere

The primary way in which the term atmosphere is employed in responses to Question 9 is as a key evaluative measure which represents the exceptionality of *Alien*, a standard against which

all the *Alien* sequels—even, in many cases, *Aliens*—is seen to be lacking. As respondents note, for instance:

Only *Aliens* and *Prometheus* really come close to the original, but even they lack the suspenseful atmosphere of the original *Alien* [#1065, Male, 26-35].

In the latter films the atmosphere and suspense that made the first one so good is lacking dramatically [#204, Male, 26-35].

Aliens was an interesting take on *Alien* but the rest just seemed to lack the bleak middle of deep space atmosphere of the original and that, for me at least, was its masterstroke [#690, Male, 36-45].

I consider *Aliens* a standard 80s action movie with none of the character development and atmosphere of the original [#678, Male, 26-35].

Aliens was a great action film, perhaps one of the best, but it lacked the atmosphere and dread of the original, even though there were more aliens, they simply weren't as scary [#16, Male, 16-25].

Across these responses, then, there is a sense that *Alien* is seen as exceeding the 'standard' expectations that audiences would have of competent (or interesting or even 'one of the best') genre films, and that the element that makes it surpass these expectations, makes it 'so good' and is its 'masterstroke', is consistently identified across these responses as being its atmosphere. With regards to the identification of key uses of atmosphere by these respondents, also of note in the last response given above is the association made between atmosphere, dread and effective scariness, the combination of which seems key, for many respondents in this 'atmosphere group', when considering why *Alien* is a superior film to its sequels: because of this combination it is seen as exceptional and thus a superior rather than a standard horror film. In Julian Hanich's analysis of what he terms 'dread scenes' in horror films, the 'threatening aspect' of such scenes tends to be heightened by atmosphere generated by a range of elements (sound, setting, use of space and *mise-en-scene*) which, for him, 'play a crucial role in supporting and facilitating' viewers' emotional responses to such scenes (2010, 170). In his

analysis of how viewers' emotions are facilitated and engaged by a variety of formal and aesthetic techniques in horror cinema (informed by phenomenological concepts and methods) Hanich identifies dread and terror 'as anticipatory forms of fear' (2010, 109), distinct from the responses of horror and shock associated with direct and suggested horror scenes which are focused on and directed towards a visually and/or audibly present horrific object (i.e. a monster or other threatening presence). It is notable that Hanich here cites horror author William F. Nolan's comment that 'what is primary in creating *true horror* is the mood' (2010, 170, my emphasis). This mirrors Spadoni's assertion that horror films are atmospheric 'compared to most other genre films' (2014a, 151) and suggests that the creation and heightening of atmosphere may be employed by other genres, but that it is often seen as the horror genre's artistic *raison d'être*. For Nolan, Spadoni and the respondents discussed in this chapter, it is something that, given the right circumstances and the right intentions on the part of the filmmaker, can elevate a horror film to 'masterpiece' status while, crucially, allowing it to still remain a horror film because it is amplifying a quality which is seen as the true, pure essence of effective or 'true' horror—the production of dread supported and enabled by the generation of atmosphere.

Indeed, the film-makers ability to *produce* cinematic atmosphere in the creation of dread, rather than rely on what one respondent calls 'simple scares', seems key to its exceptionality across the ninety-one responses that I analysed, with respondents noting that later *Alien* films—particularly *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) and *Alien vs. Predator: Requiem* (2007)—were 'too focussed on making the aliens traditional movie monsters, rather than placing the aliens within the moody and atmospheric setting of the previous films' [#899, Male, 16-25]. The focus on setting here connects this response to Spadoni's assertion that a film's atmosphere is intrinsically linked with setting and a film's

employment of space. As Spadoni notes, when analysing the employment of atmosphere in RKO's 1940s horror films:

An artist who can make things “radiate” with “felt presence” in an especially intense fashion will produce an atmospheric film. Asking how creative practitioners such as Lewton and Tourneur de-emphasize the human within the environment, the foreground against the background, and the narrative against the atmosphere may help us to explore with greater concreteness what is meant by that intangible thing atmosphere, and to consider why some films, more than others, brim with this elusive aesthetic air (2014b, 116).

These qualities, and their link to setting, are evident in a number of responses which directly connect *Alien*'s atmosphere (and *Prometheus*' employment of this prized element too) to director Ridley Scott's ability to create, and his 'love' of, 'very atmospheric sets' [#415, Male, 16-25 and #835, Male, 36-45]. However, with regards to *Alien* specifically, these respondents' understanding of what they mean by atmosphere is also evident in their responses to another qualitative question in the questionnaire, which asked respondents to discuss their favourite moment in *Alien*. It is notable that one particular sequence (which involves Lambert, Dallas and Kane's exploration of the planet and discovery of the space jockey and egg chamber) is chosen more frequently as a favourite moment by these ninety-one respondents than is the case for the *Alien Audiences* project dataset as a whole (chosen by 21% of these 91 respondents, as opposed to 14% in the dataset as a whole). This connects, in a number of responses, to the ways in which the foregrounding of space and setting in this sequence, and also in the film's opening sequence, allow for the notable foregrounding of atmosphere and mood. As these respondents note, for instance:

The build-up to the first face hugger scene: The mood, the music, the characters and then the sudden event (at least 30 minutes into the quite modestly paced film). I find this particularly more effective than (old and new) movies that don't take their time and cut to the chase, so to speak [#1077, Male, 36-45].

The opening scene showing the empty, computer-controlled cockpit. I find it sets the tone and pace of the film and gives the film the best possible starting place [#148, Male, 26-35].

It would have to be the scene with the eggs inside the chamber of the alien spacecraft. Nothing beats the chilling, ominous atmosphere of that particular scene, and it would also be the one I'd show my future kids to really whet their appetite [#1116, Male, 26-35].

There are a number of elements which inform the discursive links made between atmosphere and other attributes in these responses. Firstly, there is the fact that the last two responses identify their favourite moments in the film through reference to filmic space (the *Nostromo* cockpit, and the chamber in the alien spacecraft) and then relate their choice of this moment to tone and atmosphere, illustrating quite clearly how an appreciation of and focus on atmosphere 'invites us to consider the spatiality of a film' (Spadoni 2014a, 153). Secondly, and despite Spadoni's contention that the foregrounding of atmosphere can de-emphasize the narrative, the responses above illustrate that their appreciation of these moments is very much tied to the pacing of the film—the way in which these scenes set the pace, enable a build-up, and create and generate an ominous atmosphere, relating to Spadoni's conception that those who make atmospherically effective films can 'make things radiate with felt presence'. Consequently, and in line with Hanich's arguments about 'scenes of dread', what's being valued here is the ways in which the employment of atmosphere in a setting (which can work, for Hanich, to present these settings as constricted and/or isolated) can build tension and allow, as another respondent notes, 'the audience to engage both emotionally and intellectually in the story' [#1102, Male, 26-35]. In one of the responses above, the focus on the opening scene, which is noted as being 'empty' by the respondent (i.e. empty of characters), also connects to Spadoni's assertion that atmosphere or mood can thrive when human characters are de-emphasised, or, in this case, absent from a filmic environment, a condition which, for Kristin Thompson in her narrative analysis of the film, 'establishes [*Alien*'s] narration as being free of

links to the characters' (1999, 287), foregrounding the role of the Nostromo in this narrative, illustrated by this respondent's comment that this sequence 'sets the tone and pace of the film'.

These evaluations of *Alien* therefore chime with Spadoni and Hanich's contention that the foregrounding of setting in a horror or thriller narrative can provide a filmmaker with valuable opportunities to load a film with atmosphere. For Spadoni, once a horror film begins, 'the real work of building atmosphere gets underway' (2014b, 113), suggesting the idea that filmmakers have to work (in some ways, against the forward movement of the film's plot) to find these moments in a horror film, seize the opportunities for atmosphere creation they provide, and then capitalise upon them. This discursive conception of a filmmaker, or "artist" in Spadoni's terms, working against the forward motion of a plot to populate their film with slower-paced moments of atmosphere-aided tension, is echoed in the director's commentaries accompanying the DVD releases of *Alien* and the longer, special edition version of *Aliens*. In the *Alien* commentary, Scott notes that 'they were always worried' about the fact that 'nothing really happens action-wise for about forty minutes in the film', while Cameron overtly identifies Scott's 'they' as Twentieth Century Fox, and notes that they asked Cameron to cut certain scenes from *Aliens* which focused on 'trying to build tension before the alien appears' because they felt that Cameron should remain focused on progressing with the story (Scott 2003, commentary; Cameron 1991, commentary). In these commentaries, then, the director presents himself as attempting to imbue the film with what Spadoni calls the 'elusive aesthetic air' of atmosphere. In both Scott and Cameron's accounts, these attempts are militated against by the forward motion of the story as prioritised by the Twentieth Century Fox studio over the aim to generate atmosphere.

However, if, in these examples, it's a focus on story progression that is seen to be at odds with the prized creation of atmosphere, for other respondents, a range of factors associated with inauthenticity and the commercial aspects of genre-filmmaking are also seen to squeeze

the atmosphere out of the *Alien* sequels. The range of factors marring the *Alien* sequels are illustrated in these responses, for instance:

The other films became much more self-aware of themselves as STORIES ABOUT THE ALIEN. They weren't embedded in the atmosphere, the other world, in a way that allowed us just to LIVE there. They're too self-conscious, which kills the wonder (and the terror) [#147, Female, 36-45, emphasis in original].

Prometheus was alright but it definitely did not focus on what made *Alien* so original. There was too much CG and not enough biological and biomechanical elements in a lot of the set designs. The derelict in *Alien* was wet, misty, and hot on the inside whereas the ship in *Prometheus* was cold and honestly looked like it was made of black painted wood (The 4k cameras didn't help in creating an atmosphere like in *Alien* either) [#415, Male, 16-25].

The others [beyond the first three films] are comic book films made for an entirely different generation [#171, Male, 26-35].

Alien Resurrection, *Alien vs Predator* and *Alien vs Predator: Requiem* come across as a glossy gory advert to sell miniatures to moody, geeky teenagers [#148, Male, 26-35].

In the first response above, the factors which impact on the sequels' lower standards (when measured evaluatively against the original film's employment of atmosphere) include a 'self-conscious' or 'self-aware' approach to telling a story about the alien. So, in contrast to the earlier discussion of de-emphasising the 'foreground against the background', these films are seen to emphasise the presence in these films of a monster over the realisation of a world in which the monster and the other characters exist and are 'embedded'. As realized in *Alien*, a world that is so palpable for this respondent that it can allow 'us just to LIVE there'. Here, then, is an identification of a second key use of atmosphere in *Alien*; not just to generate tension and dread in an audience but to, in Mark J. P. Wolf's terms, encourage immersion and absorption in its storyworld. As Wolf argues, illustrating the importance of atmosphere to this process (and shedding further light on many of these respondents' favourite moments from the film):

World-building...often results in data, exposition, and digressions that provide information about a world, slowing down narrative or even bringing it to a halt temporarily, yet much of the excess detail and descriptive richness can be an important part of the audience's experience. World information that does not actively advance the story may still provide mood and atmosphere, or further form our image of characters, places, and events (2012, 29).

In the second response above, the focus remains on comparisons of space and setting, with atmosphere being seen to have been removed from Ridley Scott's *Alien* prequel, *Prometheus*, due to the employment of contemporary technologies, including CGI and the employment of 4K cameras. The focus on the contrasts in the visual depiction of the alien ships in *Alien* and *Prometheus* provides further illustrative detail in this response, as the respondent contrasts the (seemingly diegetically integrated) 'wet, misty, and hot' atmosphere of *Alien*'s derelict ship with an emphasis on *Prometheus*' alien ship not as a diegetic element but as a constructed and artificial set, through a focus on how it appears to have been made by the set designers (with 'black painted wood'). Again, such tendencies, like the self-conscious storytelling of the sequels addressed in the first response, are therefore presented discursively here as disrupting the immersion into the storyworld seen to be so effectively achieved in the original *Alien* film.

Beyond this, and as illustrated in the final two responses above, atmosphere is also seen to be lacking or neutered in the last three films in the *Alien* series (*Alien Resurrection*, and the two *Alien vs Predator* films) due to a shift in target audience and associated commercial strategies. In the last response, the final three films in the *Alien* series are deemed to be 'glossy' and 'gory', factors which are then linked to overtly commercial rather than artistic or aesthetic concerns through the references made to adverts, miniatures and teenagers. Indeed, this focus on merchandise and teenagers seem to link with other responses amongst the 'atmosphere group', which outline how their preference for *Aliens* has shifted to *Alien* as they have got older. As one respondent notes, for instance: 'As a kid I obviously liked *Aliens* more for the action and the Kenner toys that I loved as a kid. But over time I began to appreciate the original

more' [#469, Male, 16-25]. Here, then, amongst these *Alien*-valuing respondents, atmosphere is not only associated with dread, tension, the presence of emotion and a palpable storyworld, but also with a form of film appreciation which is associated with the reflective, the nuanced, the darker and the more adult. Indeed, such shifting forms of appreciation (on these terms, from *Aliens* to *Alien*) may help to explain the higher numbers of younger people among this atmosphere-appreciating group of respondents (with 67% of the 'atmosphere group' being under 35). Many of these respondents were either extremely young or not even born when *Alien* was first released at the cinema, but are more inclined to refer to merchandise or elements of CGI in the later *Alien* sequels in negative terms than is the case across the dataset as a whole, suggesting a move, across their history of viewership of the *Alien* series, to a more reflective appreciation of the original film and its darker atmosphere rather than what they see as the 'glossy', 'comic book' nature of the sequels.

It is on these terms, relating to the mature, reflective appreciation of dark atmosphere, that, for these respondents, some of the *Alien* sequels hold more potential to be appreciated and defended than others. As the analysis so far has illustrated, *Alien*'s status as a superior horror film, which, for respondents, can be elevated not only over the film's sequels but also 'standard' genre films more broadly, relates to its effective employment of atmosphere generated through dynamic interaction with a range of other filmic elements, from the depiction of setting and a complete and immersive storyworld to storytelling techniques associated with pace, tension, dread and emotion. However, while for the majority of these ninety-one respondents, all the subsequent *Alien* sequels lack this 'unparalleled' use of atmosphere [#690, Male, 36-45], the employment of this evaluative measure can elevate appraisals of some of the *Alien* sequels, particularly *Prometheus* and, most markedly, *Alien 3*. As respondents note, for instance:

Alien 3 was flawed in many ways, but I loved the atmosphere [#344, Male, 46-55].

Prometheus was a wreck but had its moments and had great atmosphere [#23, Male, 46-55].

Given the extremely troubled nature of the production, it is obvious that *Alien 3* is not as well made a film as the first two, but what it lacks in structure, it more than made up for in atmosphere [#189, Male, 16-25].

Prometheus had a laughable storyline as well as terrible acting, but the atmosphere made it all worth spending a ticket to the cinema [#1116, Male, 26-35].

Alien 3 I also liked a lot, but it didn't carry the suspense of the original. I give it points for its dark, cold atmosphere [#42, Male, 26-35].

In all these responses, which are all structured in a similar discursive manner, the flaws of *Alien 3* and *Prometheus* are firstly identified: the two films are presented as 'a wreck', 'not as well made a film as the first two', having a 'laughable storyline' and 'terrible acting', and as not carrying 'the suspense of the original'. However, both films are then critically redeemed and given kudos (or 'points') by these respondents for their generation of the precious commodity of atmosphere. For Spadoni, 'a long-standing tendency in critical writing on horror films is to find some films succeeding, as films, on the strength of their atmospheres alone' (2014b, 110). As these responses illustrate, a similar kind of evaluation is being enacted here amongst long-term, invested audiences of *Alien*, with atmosphere being constituted as these films' saving grace which raises them, to some extent, from the mire of the more overtly negative critiques given by these respondents to the other films in the *Alien* series.

In the case of *Alien 3*, it is noteworthy that, for these respondents, atmosphere's dynamic relation with suspense, pace and structure seems to be lacking (or to have not been capitalised upon) within this film. Yet, simultaneously, its atmosphere is still valued for its ability to infuse the film with a sense of emotion, environment or presence—a darkness and a coldness, to cite the last response above. This emphasis on the specific qualities of the atmosphere in *Alien 3* is also evident in the following responses:

Alien 3 I feel is very underrated and has all the emotion of the original and is oozing with atmosphere [#469, Male, 16-25].

I appreciated *Alien 3* for its grim style atmosphere [#862, Male, 26-35].

I like *Alien 3* a lot even if it didn't bring much new to the table. I love the bleak atmosphere [#931, Female, 26-35].

I do love *Alien 3* for its attempt to capture that helpless and claustrophobic atmosphere that makes *Alien* such a great horror film, but I fault Fox studios and not Fincher for its (almost) failure [#304, Male, 26-35].

Regardless of how effectively or ineffectively it is employed to support tension, pace, and storytelling in *Alien 3*, the value of the film's atmosphere is particularly related in these responses to the generation of emotion, and the way in which it provides, supports or enhances the presence of feelings, sensations and ideas associated with grimness, bleakness, helplessness and claustrophobia. For these respondents, *Alien 3* seems to belong to the world of the *Alien* series in a way that is not the case with the subsequent sequels (*Alien Resurrection*, *Alien vs Prometheus* and *Alien vs Predator: Requiem*). This is also illustrated by the way in which an ideal framework or template for 'an *Alien* movie' is employed by respondents to redeem and defend *Alien 3*. For one respondent, for instance, *Alien*, *Aliens* and *Alien 3* all 'felt like *Alien* movies', while, for another, *Alien 3* 'had the feel an *Alien* movie should have' [997, Female, 26-35, and 313, Male, 16-25]. This notion of 'feel' seems to chime with Spadoni's argument that the term atmosphere refers predominantly to 'the texture of the world a film creates' (2014b, 112). In turn, these respondents' measuring of the extent to which the *Alien* sequels have the 'feel' of 'an *Alien* movie' points to the ways in which consistency, which Mark J. P. Wolf sees as so essential to effective world-building, plays an important role in these evaluations, informing assessments of how atmosphere helps to 'create the illusion of another world' (2012, 34).

To return to an earlier point, what is also evident in the last audience response cited above (which also echoes the earlier-cited comments from Ridley Scott and James Cameron) is the way in which this ‘capturing’ of atmosphere is seen to be at odds with the studio (Twentieth Century Fox), who are here explicitly associated with the film’s flaws and failures rather than *Alien 3*’s director, David Fincher. As is now well known, and as was extensively documented in the supplementary materials accompanying *Alien 3*’s release as part of the 2003 *Alien Quadrilogy* DVD boxset, Fincher’s experience making *Alien 3* was extremely troubled, characterised by lengthy battles with the studio over the shape and content of the film. In this respect, what is noteworthy is that mentions of Fincher amongst the ‘atmosphere group’ responses invariably refer to these circumstances. Aside from the aforementioned response distancing Fincher from culpability for the film’s flaws, one respondent, for instance, refers to Fincher ‘practically disowning the film’ [#136, Male, 16-25], and another notes that ‘*Alien 3* was pretty much doomed after its pre-production problems and David Fincher did the best he could with a poisoned chalice’ [#164, Male, 26-35]. Meanwhile, a third respondent states that their assessment of *Alien 3* as worse than the original film is based on ‘D Fincher’s vision and decisions being compromised and stomped on throughout the process by D[avid] Giler’, one of the film’s key producers and screenwriters [#663, Male, 46-55]. For respondents, this illustrates the rather vexed relationship between *Alien 3*—its qualities and characteristics—and its director: *Alien 3* was Fincher’s feature film debut, but as his career developed and his status as an ‘auteur’ steadily emerged, he felt that he could publicly distance himself from the film because of his ‘decisions being compromised’ during its making. Interestingly, this distancing is often mobilized similarly by respondents through discourses of ‘compromise’ and studio interference as opposed to blaming Fincher for the shortcomings of *Alien 3*.

This set of circumstances, explicitly referred to amongst this group of respondents, clearly complicates their evaluations of *Alien 3* in relation to the *Alien* series as a whole. The

aforementioned 2003 *Alien Quadrilogy* boxset included not only the original version of the film but also a special edition, which, as the accompanying booklet notes, is not a director's cut but 'a restored and re-mastered presentation of the 1991 assembly cut of the film' featuring thirty minutes of additional footage (2003, 15), although on the basis of the ninety-one responses analysed in this chapter, this assembly cut is frequently referred to as the 'director's cut' of the film. Notably, the existence of this assembly cut seems, on a number of occasions, to bolster respondents' conceptions that *Alien 3* is a film with value because of its atmosphere. As one respondent notes, for instance, '*Alien 3*, especially the director's cut, is underrated and very atmospheric' [#648, Male, 16-25], a version that can be conceived as a director's cut because it has an enhanced employment of atmosphere that brings it closer to the intended vision of Fincher than the compromised original version of the film.

Conclusion: Atmosphere as a Transtextual Measure

In many ways, this returns the chapter to Brooker's argument that the distinctiveness of *Alien* as a franchise is due to the involvement in each instalment (or, at least, the first four films and *Prometheus*) of an 'auteur' director. In his account of the evaluations of the first four films in the series by internet fans, Brooker cites an example of a fan comment, which, for him, illustrates fan recognition of the 'distinction between directorial styles' evident across the *Alien* series (Brooker 1999, 63). This fan's evaluation notes regarding the first four films in the *Alien* franchise that:

each of them have their own "trademark". Scott has his dark and gloomy big space. Cameron has his big budget spending. Fincher is quite similar to Scott in some ways, with his gloomy corridors. Jeunet has his dark sense of humor mixed with excellent effects and a more pristine view on the aliens (quoted in Brooker 1999, 63).

While here, each director is associated with a ‘trademark’, it is notable that Scott and Fincher, in particular and in line with the perspectives evident in the *Alien Audiences* project’s ‘atmosphere group’, are associated with space and setting and their filmic depiction as ‘gloomy’ (in comparison to the association of Cameron with budget, and Jeunet with effects). On this basis, it could be argued that the connections between *Alien* and *Alien 3* relate to the fact that Fincher was attempting to emulate and recapture the atmospheric qualities of Scott’s original *Alien* film as much as, or in dynamic tension with, his attempts to imbue his film with a distinctive trademark. This is supported, for instance, by *Alien* and *Alien 3* editor Terry Rawlings’ comment that Scott was ‘a hero of David Fincher’s’ and it was ‘clear he wanted it to have some of the pacing and tension of *Alien*’ (Rawlings 2003, commentary).

However, for the ninety-one respondents analysed in this chapter, atmosphere—its identification and appreciation—has become a defining aspect of what makes an *Alien* film have ‘the feel an *Alien* movie should have’, with this determining the framework and parameters through which all films in the *Alien* series are valued, regardless of a particular *Alien* film’s director, their trademark preoccupations, and the efficacy of their relationship with Twentieth Century Fox. In this sense, atmosphere, for these respondents, is the key transtextual dimension determining the success or failure of each film in the series. It is the primary evaluative element in ‘the ties that link’ these ‘texts to one another’, to use the definition that Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer employ when discussing Gerard Genette’s conception of transtextuality (2016, 1). Over the years and over multiple viewings, it is the key element that has illustrated, explained and enhanced the original *Alien*’s ‘long term durability’ for these respondents [#1102, Male, 26-35]. And, in turn, this detailed appreciation of *Alien*’s atmosphere has facilitated a recuperation (and potential ‘cultification’) of *Alien 3* as a film that attempts, within the context of Fincher’s now well-documented battles with the studio, to “capture” the same precious atmosphere that is seen to imbue and elevate the original.

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