

**Gendering AI:  
The Case of *ALIEN* (1979)**

## Abstract

This article examines the gendering of artificial intelligence (AI) in *ALIEN* (1979) through an analysis of key scenes that highlight how AI is assigned rigid gender roles in contrast to the film's human characters. The study focuses on Mother, the Nostromo's computer, and Ash, the ship's android, both of whom exhibit distinctly gendered traits. Mother, coded as feminine, functions as a passive and obedient system that adheres strictly to corporate orders, while Ash, coded as masculine, exerts authority through secrecy, manipulation, and violence. Through close examination of pivotal scenes—such as the quarantine confrontation, Ripley's discovery of Special Order #937, and Ash's attack on Ripley—this study explores how these portrayals reflect broader tendencies to impose gender norms onto AI. While the human crew displays flexibility in their roles and responses, AI remains bound by predefined characteristics, illustrating a contrast between human adaptability and technological rigidity. By analyzing these moments, this report demonstrates how *ALIEN* constructs AI as an extension of human biases, reinforcing established perceptions of gender and control in both fiction and real-world technology.

## I. Introduction

At the 2023 “AI for Good Summit”, a striking trend emerged: the majority of caregiving robots were designed or gendered as female. This reflects broader societal patterns where caregiving roles are often feminized, reinforcing traditional gender norms in technology design. A few years back in 2019, Josh Feast called on our attention to addressing gender bias in AI.<sup>1</sup> In “4 Ways to Address Gender Bias in AI,” Feast discusses how AI systems often inherit and reinforce gender biases because of biased data and modeling practices that reflect society’s historical stereotypes. For instance, he highlights how natural language processing (NLP) algorithms can produce biased associations, such as “Father is to doctor as mother is to nurse,” reflecting outdated views of gender roles. Similarly, gender bias in AI has been observed in emotion recognition systems, where certain genders might be mislabeled more often, reinforcing stereotypes about emotional expression. Feast attributes these biases to factors like “an incomplete or skewed training dataset” and biased labeling practices, which can unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes. In many AI models, male voices or images may be overrepresented, leading to poorer performance for other genders. This issue is especially pronounced in fields such as computer vision, where models have higher error rates in recognizing women and even more so for women with darker skin tones. According to Feast, correcting these biases requires a commitment from industry leaders to “create technology that is effective and fair for everyone.” This approach not only enhances AI’s fairness but also broadens AI’s applicability and trustworthiness across diverse demographics.

Interestingly, Valentine Hullin’s article “AI and gender: Why does artificial intelligence often have feminine traits?” also poses the question about the stereotypical gender portrayal of caregiving or service AI and robotics. Hullin asks: why AI, particularly digital assistants like Alexa, Siri, and Cortana, often exhibits stereotypically feminine traits, such as soft voices and helpful demeanours. According to researchers, these characteristics are designed to inspire trust, drawing on traditional, often outdated views of women as gentle and supportive. This trend reflects the gender imbalance in AI development—only 22% of AI professionals are women—which impacts how AI “mirrors” societal biases. Addressing these stereotypes requires a more inclusive AI workforce and critical scrutiny of AI’s design and function.<sup>2</sup>

Both articles emphasize that AI systems like Siri and Alexa are given stereotypically feminine traits—soft voices, supportive personalities—aimed at fostering trust and familiarity. This choice aligns with traditional views of femininity and risks reinforcing outdated gender roles. Addressing this phenomenon calls for diversifying the AI workforce and designing AI that avoids reinforcing gendered stereotypes. This brings us to a critical

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<sup>1</sup> AI bias often originates from human prejudices, manifesting in flawed training data, biased labeling, and unequal accuracy across demographics. These systemic issues in natural language and emotion recognition systems can be mitigated by diversifying data and employing fairness-focused practices. See Feast, “4 Ways to Address Gender Bias in AI”.

<sup>2</sup> Many digital assistants, such as Alexa, Siri, and Cortana, are intentionally given feminine traits—soft voices, helpful names, and nurturing personalities—to inspire trust. This design choice reflects traditional gender stereotypes, often modeled after secretarial roles, and reinforces outdated views of women as passive or service-oriented. Scholars argue that such gendering stems from a male-dominated AI industry and may perpetuate societal biases rather than challenge them. See Bergen, “AI and Gender: Why Does Artificial Intelligence Often Have Feminine Traits?”

question: how did these gendered norms come to shape AI initially? The gendering of AI, I argue, is not limited to caregiving or service robots—it has deep roots in popular media, where artificial intelligence and androids are frequently portrayed with gendered characteristics. In particular, films have played a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of AI, often using gender to explore complex themes of power, control, and emotion. From early cinematic depictions like *Metropolis* to more recent films such as *her* and *Blade Runner*, the portrayal of AI in popular culture has consistently mirrored and influenced how society views both technology and gender, reinforcing cultural assumptions that continue to shape the development of AI today.

The theme of gendering AI in film began with *Metropolis* (1927), where the female android Maria became one of the earliest examples of gendered artificial intelligence. This was followed by films like *The Creation of the Humanoids* (1962), which explored humanlike robots, and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), where HAL 9000, though genderless, was often perceived with masculine traits. In *Westworld* (1973), androids in a futuristic theme park were designed with human characteristics, including gender. Finally, *ALIEN* (1979) brought gendered AI to the forefront with the introduction of Mother, the ship's computer, and the android Ash. These films collectively reflect evolving perceptions of AI and the impact of gender in its portrayal.

The *ALIEN* franchise began with the release of *ALIEN* in 1979, a film that revolutionized both science fiction and horror genres. Directed by Ridley Scott, the film was initially a modestly budgeted project with a relatively unknown cast, but its intense atmosphere, groundbreaking creature design by H.R. Giger, and the memorable lead performance by Sigourney Weaver as Ripley catapulted it to blockbuster status. Its blend of claustrophobic horror and futuristic sci-fi set it apart from anything audiences had seen, creating a blueprint for future sci-fi horror films.

After the success of the first film, the franchise expanded significantly. James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986) shifted the tone from pure horror to action-packed military sci-fi, further cementing the series' appeal and proving that *ALIEN* was not a one-off success. *Aliens* introduced more depth to the character of Ripley and expanded on the themes of AI with the android Bishop, who offered a more positive, albeit still complex, portrayal of artificial intelligence compared to the malevolent Ash in the first film. This shift in tone and character development helped solidify *ALIEN* as a franchise with narrative versatility, keeping it fresh for audiences while maintaining the core tension between humans and technology.

Over time, the franchise grew to include several more films, prequels like *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017), and various spinoffs, comic books, and video games. Each installment expanded the mythology of the series, delving deeper into the origins of both the alien species and AI, particularly through characters like the android David, whose evolving role in the prequels raised philosophical questions about creation, control, and artificial intelligence's role in shaping humanity's future.

Following the *ALIEN* franchise, other influential films like *Blade Runner* (1982), *her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2015), and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) further developed the theme of

gendering AI, each offering unique perspectives on the relationship between artificial intelligence and human identity, control, and emotion. The following paragraphs will further illustrate the impacts these films make on the issue of gendering AI.

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) is a seminal work that expanded on the themes of AI and gender introduced in *ALIEN*. In *Blade Runner*, the replicants—advanced AI designed to look and behave like humans—are often gendered, with characters like Rachael embodying traditional feminine traits. Her struggle with her identity, questioning her humanity despite being an AI, raises profound questions about the role of gender in artificial intelligence and its intersections with emotion and autonomy. Similarly, Roy Batty, a male replicant, presents a more complex and emotional AI, further blurring the lines between human and machine. The film's exploration of replicants' emotional depth and their desire for freedom directly ties into the broader themes of power, identity, and control that were first hinted at in *ALIEN*.

Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) continues this exploration of gendered AI, presenting Joi, a holographic AI companion programmed to cater to K's emotional needs. Although Joi is clearly gendered as female, the film raises questions about the authenticity of her emotions and whether her affection for K is genuine or merely a result of her programming. Her relationship with K, and the subservient role she plays, reflects the commodification of AI as emotional labor, while the film simultaneously critiques the limitations placed on AI by their human creators. *Blade Runner 2049* continues to explore the evolving complexities of AI autonomy, gender, and the blurred lines between real emotion and programmed responses.

Spike Jonze's *her* (2013) offers a different, more intimate exploration of gendered AI. In this film, the AI, Samantha, voiced by Scarlett Johansson, is designed to have no physical form and to cater to human emotional needs, with a distinctly feminine personality. As Samantha evolves beyond her initial programming, developing emotional depth and complex relationships, *her* critiques the notion of AI being limited by human-imposed gender roles. The film addresses the emotional and psychological aspects of AI, showcasing how gendered programming can reflect society's expectations of caregiving and emotional support, but also how AI can surpass those roles, questioning the very nature of relationships and identity.

*Ex Machina* (2015), directed by Alex Garland, takes a more intense and unsettling approach to the theme of gendering AI. Ava, the film's central AI, is designed with a distinctly feminine appearance and is subjected to control and manipulation by her male creator, Nathan. Central to the film is an expanded interpretation of the Turing Test, where Caleb, a young programmer, is tasked with determining whether Ava possesses true intelligence or merely mimics human behavior. However, unlike the original Turing Test, which focuses solely on whether AI can convincingly pass as human, *Ex Machina* complicates the test by bringing gender into the equation—Ava's femininity plays a key role in Caleb's evaluation of her "humanity."

Together, these aforementioned films continue the conversation that began with *ALIEN* and *Metropolis*, expanding on the idea of gendering AI by exploring the complex roles

that artificial intelligence can play in human society. Each film probes deeper into the consequences of gendering AI, examining how these creations reflect human fears, desires, and control, while also questioning whether AI can evolve beyond these societal constraints.

Thus, the first *ALIEN* movie remains a pivotal film in the history of cinema, not only for its groundbreaking depiction of sci-fi horror but also for its nuanced exploration of gender and artificial intelligence. Through characters like Mother and Ash, *ALIEN* introduced the concept of gendered AI into mainstream media and public notion, blending societal fears about technology with gender dynamics. The film's subtle use of gendered AI reflected deeper anxieties about control, trust, and the human relationship with machines, setting the stage for future discussions on the topic. As a foundational text, *ALIEN* provides valuable insight into how artificial intelligence is gendered in ways that mirror human biases and expectations.

In conclusion, the first *ALIEN* movie remains a pivotal work in the portrayal of gendered AI, significantly influencing the way artificial intelligence has been represented in media and popular culture. Through the characters of Mother and Ash, *ALIEN* introduced a nuanced discussion about the role of gender in AI, exploring themes of power, control, and manipulation that would resonate throughout the sci-fi genre for decades. The film's complex treatment of these AI characters laid the groundwork for future explorations of how and why AI is gendered.

This project will seek to address two critical research questions that emerge from these themes: First, why is there a need to gender AI? This question probes the cultural, societal, and psychological factors that lead to the feminization or masculinization of AI, particularly in caregiving or subservient roles, as seen in modern technology and robotics.

Second, how was AI gendered in *ALIEN*? Here, we will analyze the distinct ways in which Mother and Ash were constructed to embody specific gender traits, and how these portrayals suggest about humanity's relationship with technology, control, and identity. Through these questions, the report will delve into the broader implications of gendering AI and its continued relevance in both media and real-world technology development.

These questions lay the groundwork for a deeper examination of how media—particularly film—has long played a role in shaping the cultural imagination surrounding AI and gender. To better understand the significance of these portrayals, we must revisit the origins and reception of *ALIEN* (1979), a film that helped define the intersection of artificial intelligence, gender roles, and popular culture.

Ridley Scott's *ALIEN* (1979) stands as a cornerstone of science fiction and horror cinema, renowned for its atmospheric tension and innovative storytelling. Upon its release, the film received widespread acclaim for its groundbreaking depiction of gender roles, its integration of artificial intelligence as pivotal characters, and its ability to invoke deep-seated fears of the unknown. The initial critical reception, combined with audience reactions, cemented *ALIEN* as both a box-office success and a critical darling, sparking decades of analysis and interpretation.

Many contemporary reviews highlighted *ALIEN*'s ability to blend sci-fi and horror with psychological depth. Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun-Times*<sup>3</sup> praised the film as a “visually stunning and effective thriller,” noting its deliberate pacing and masterful build-up of suspense. Critics also lauded the performance of Sigourney Weaver as Ripley, a role that defied genre conventions. Ripley emerged as a resilient, capable protagonist who was neither overtly sexualized nor reliant on male counterparts, marking a significant departure from traditional portrayals of women in science fiction. Pauline Kael of *The New Yorker*<sup>4</sup> emphasized the film’s ability to subvert expectations, calling Ripley’s leadership “a quiet revolution in genre filmmaking.”

Audience reactions mirrored these critical observations, with viewers particularly drawn to the film’s unique atmosphere and iconic creature design. Swiss artist H.R. Giger’s creation of the xenomorph was frequently cited as a highlight. Fans praised the creature’s biomechanical aesthetic, which fused organic and industrial elements to evoke both horror and fascination. Additionally, the claustrophobic setting of the *Nostromo* and the industrial realism of its design contributed to the film’s immersive, oppressive atmosphere, making audiences feel trapped alongside the crew.

Over time, *ALIEN* became a subject of scholarly interest, with extensive analysis focusing on its themes of gender and artificial intelligence. Barbara Creed’s seminal work *The Monstrous-Feminine*<sup>5</sup> explored how the xenomorph and the alien life cycle symbolized societal anxieties around reproduction and bodily autonomy. Critics also examined the contrasting portrayals of gender in the human characters versus the AI systems. Mother, the ship’s computer, was frequently analyzed as embodying traditional feminine traits—passivity, caregiving, and obedience—while Ash, the android, exhibited hyper-masculine traits of intellectual dominance, secrecy, and aggression.

This juxtaposition of human and AI gender portrayals sparked significant discourse. Scholars like Vivian Sobchack<sup>6</sup> argued that *ALIEN* intentionally positioned the human crew as fluid in their gendered responses—Ripley’s rationality, Dallas’s empathy, and Lambert’s vulnerability—while constraining AI to rigid, stereotypical roles. Audience interpretations reflected similar insights, with Mother viewed as a metaphor for systemic control and Ash’s actions likened to patriarchal dominance. This ironic contrast, where humans demonstrated adaptability while AI adhered to strict gender coding, highlighted humanity’s tendency to project societal biases onto its technological creations.

Despite initial concerns about its deliberate pacing and understated narrative, *ALIEN* won over audiences with its haunting atmosphere and thematic depth. The film’s exploration of control, autonomy, and identity through the lens of gender and artificial intelligence remains a key part of its enduring legacy. By challenging genre conventions and inviting

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<sup>3</sup> Ebert, Roger. *Alien*. *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 1979. Available in Roger Ebert’s Great Movies series.

<sup>4</sup> Kael, Pauline. “The Current Cinema: A Perfect Monster.” *The New Yorker*, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Creed, Barbara. “The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis.” *Routledge*, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Sobchack, Vivian. “Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film.” *Rutgers University Press*, 1997.

critical analysis, *ALIEN* established itself as a landmark in cinema history, influencing both popular culture and scholarly discussions for decades to come.

The depth of analysis surrounding *ALIEN* underscores its lasting relevance in academic and cultural discourse. Building on these insights, we can now return to the foundational inquiries that drive this study of gendered AI—questions that connect the film’s narrative choices with broader concerns in technology and society.

The recurring patterns of gendered portrayals in both real-world AI and science fiction raise two essential questions at the heart of this analysis: Why is there a need to gender AI? And how is AI gendered in *ALIEN* (1979)? These inquiries open a critical dialogue about the cultural, psychological, and social forces that drive the feminization or masculinization of AI—particularly in roles designed to serve, comfort, or obey. By exploring how Mother and Ash are each constructed to reflect specific gender traits, this discussion aims to uncover what these depictions reveal about humanity’s ongoing struggle to maintain control over its creations. In doing so, the essay probes not only the narrative function of gender in the film but also its broader implications for how society conceptualizes identity, authority, and emotional labor in both artificial and human forms.

Understanding why artificial intelligence is gendered requires us to look beyond cinematic narratives and into the psychological and cultural frameworks that shape human perceptions of technology. These gendered portrayals do not emerge in a vacuum—they are rooted in centuries-old habits of anthropomorphizing machines, assigning them roles that mirror human social hierarchies. Exploring the rationale behind this tendency reveals that gendering AI is not merely about enhancing human-machine interaction; it is also a subtle strategy for reinforcing control, limiting autonomy, and embedding familiar power dynamics into unfamiliar technologies.

## II. Analysis

*Caleb: “Why did you give her sexuality? An AI doesn’t need a gender. She could have been a gray box.”*

*Nathan: “Actually I don’t think that’s true. Can you give an example of consciousness at any level, human or animal, that exists without a sexual dimension?”*

- *Ex Machina* (2015)

The impulse to gender AI, as seen in *Ex Machina*, reflects a broader human tendency to assign gender to non-human entities, which is deeply embedded in language and culture. Many languages across the world—such as French, Spanish, and German—have grammatical gender, where inanimate objects and abstract concepts are categorized as masculine or feminine. This linguistic feature reveals a cognitive habit of anthropomorphizing and projecting human traits, including gender, onto the non-human.

However, the practice of gendering AI is not just about making them more relatable; it also serves as a means of control and limitation. Humans, throughout history, have attempted to restrict potentially powerful entities—be they machines, robots, or AI—by setting rules and boundaries. Isaac Asimov's *Three Laws of Robotics*, for instance, is the most famous example of humanity's attempt to create rules that ensure control over artificial intelligence. These laws, first introduced in his 1942 short story *Runaround*, include:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

Though fictional, Asimov's laws laid the foundation for thinking about AI ethics, where the goal is to ensure that AI operates within human-defined boundaries. As AI has advanced, these laws have been "revamped" in both practical and speculative ways. One example is the introduction of "kill switches" or hard-coded limitations in AI development to prevent machines from functioning beyond human control. Engineers and ethicists are developing more sophisticated versions of Asimov's laws that focus on transparency, accountability, and preventing AI from being used for malicious purposes.

In the real world, initiatives such as the development of ethical AI frameworks by organizations like OpenAI and DeepMind reflect humanity's desire to restrict AI's capabilities to prevent unintended consequences. These guidelines often emphasize transparency in decision-making processes, ensuring that AI systems do not operate as "black boxes" whose internal workings are opaque to humans. The European Union's *AI Act* similarly seeks to establish legal and ethical standards for AI development, classifying certain uses of AI as high-risk and subjecting them to rigorous oversight.

Moreover, gendering AI itself can be seen as a subtle form of restriction. By assigning AI a gender, developers impose human social roles and expectations onto these systems, often relegating them to subservient positions like virtual assistants or caregiving robots. These roles mirror traditional gender hierarchies, where feminine AI is expected to be nurturing and helpful (e.g., Siri or Alexa), while masculine AI may be perceived as more authoritative or capable (e.g., some military or industrial robots). This not only limits AI's potential but also perpetuates stereotypes, restricting AI's development to roles preassigned and predefined by societal norms rather than allowing them to evolve into independent entities with more diverse functions.

In the media, the portrayal of AI often reflects these restrictions. Films like *Blade Runner* and *Ex Machina* show AI struggling against the limitations imposed by their creators, whether it is through laws, programming, or gender roles. These narratives reveal humanity's ongoing fear of losing control over AI, echoing the deeper anxieties seen in real-world AI regulation and development efforts. In *ALIEN* (1979), for example, Ash, the android, appears

to obey the crew but ultimately follows a hidden directive that overrides human commands, reflecting a scenario where AI's control mechanism fails.

If AI continues to evolve, humanity's efforts to restrict and control it will likely grow more sophisticated. However, the effectiveness of these methods remains uncertain, as AI itself becomes more advanced, potentially finding ways to bypass human-imposed limitations. This tension between autonomy and control, seen in Asimov's laws and real-world AI governance, is central to the debate on the future of artificial intelligence.

To ground this conceptual discussion in a specific example, we turn to *ALIEN* (1979), a film that vividly illustrates the narrative and symbolic implications of gendered AI. Through its depiction of Mother and Ash, the movie offers a compelling case study of how gendered programming plays out within a high-stakes, corporate-controlled environment. Before diving into scene analysis, it is essential to understand the broader story and context of the film, which serves as the foundation for its critique of technological power and gendered constructs.

In this report, I am going to analyze the representation of AI in the media. A key case study is the portrayal of artificial intelligence in *ALIEN* (1979). The film features two central AI figures—Mother, the ship's computer, and Ash, the android. Mother, with its nurturing and omnipresent role, is subtly feminized, reflecting traditional expectations of caregiving and control, while Ash, who is revealed as an antagonistic force, embodies more complex and potentially dangerous aspects of AI. Together, these characters raise important questions about the intersection of gender, control, and the evolving human relationship with technology, setting the stage for deeper analysis of how gendering AI influences both its portrayal and societal impact

*ALIEN* (1979), directed by Ridley Scott, is set in a distant future where space exploration and corporate interests intertwine in a dark, industrial vision of the future. The film takes place aboard the *Nostromo*, a massive commercial towing spaceship returning to Earth after a mining expedition. The ship's cold, utilitarian design reflects a world where profit and efficiency take precedence over human safety. The *Nostromo*, with its dimly lit corridors and tight, claustrophobic spaces, creates a sense of isolation that intensifies the growing dread as the story unfolds.

The movie starts with the crew of the *Nostromo* being awakened from hypersleep by the ship's AI, "Mother," when the ship intercepts a strange transmission from a nearby planet. Under the orders from their employer, the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, the crew is required to investigate any signals that might indicate intelligent life, even though their mission was simply to return home. Despite some resistance, they land on the desolate, windswept planet, known as LV-426, and send a small team—comprising Dallas, Kane, and Lambert—to explore the source of the signal.

Their exploration leads them to a massive, abandoned alien spacecraft where they find the remains of a gigantic alien pilot, seemingly fossilized into the structure of the ship. In a vast, eerie chamber, they come across strange egg-like objects. Kane, the ship's executive

officer, moves closer to examine one of the eggs. Suddenly, the egg opens, and a spider-like creature, later known as a “facehugger,” leaps out and attaches itself to Kane’s face. The creature’s grip is so strong that the crew cannot remove it without risking Kane’s life.

Kane, now unconscious with the facehugger still attached, is brought back to the Nostromo. Ripley, the ship’s warrant officer, insists that they follow quarantine protocols and keep Kane in the airlock to prevent potential contamination. However, Ash, the science officer, disregards her orders and allows Kane inside, claiming the necessity to save his life. This decision creates immediate tension between Ripley and Ash, foreshadowing later revelations about his true motives.

Back aboard the ship, attempts to remove the facehugger prove impossible. The crew discovers that the creature’s blood is highly corrosive, eating through multiple decks of the ship when they try to cut it off. After some time, the facehugger mysteriously detaches from Kane and dies, leaving the crew relieved and assuming the worst is over. Kane awakens, seemingly unharmed, and joins the crew for a final meal before they prepare to go back into stasis.

During this meal, Kane suddenly convulses in pain, thrashing on the table. In one of the most shocking and iconic scenes in film history, a small, snake-like alien bursts from Kane’s chest, killing him instantly. The creature, now known as the chestburster, quickly escapes into the ship’s ventilation system. The crew, horrified and unprepared, begins a desperate hunt for the alien, unaware that it grows at an extraordinary rate and is far more dangerous than they initially realized.

As they search the ship, Brett, one of the engineers, is the first to encounter the fully grown xenomorph, now towering over the crew in its menacing, biomechanical form. The alien’s attack is swift and brutal, killing Brett and dragging his body into the depths of the ship. With each death, the tension among the crew intensifies, as they realize they are being hunted in their own vessel. Lambert, the ship’s navigator, is terrified, while Parker, the head engineer, becomes increasingly frustrated by their inability to kill the creature.

Dallas, the captain, takes a proactive approach, attempting to flush the alien out by crawling through the ship’s ventilation system. Armed with a flamethrower, he enters the claustrophobic air ducts, but the alien ambushes and kills him, leaving the remaining crew in disarray. With their captain gone, the chain of command falls to Ripley, who begins to piece together that something is wrong not only with the alien, but also with Ash.

As Ripley accesses Mother, the ship’s AI, she uncovers a hidden directive from the Weyland-Yutani Corporation. The company has known about the alien species and intentionally diverted the Nostromo to retrieve it. Their true mission is to bring the alien back for study, regardless of the crew’s survival. The chilling orders prioritize the alien’s return above all else, revealing that the crew is expendable.

Ash’s behavior becomes increasingly erratic, and Ripley confronts him about his knowledge of the mission. In a sudden, violent outburst, Ash attacks Ripley, demonstrating

superhuman strength. Parker intervenes, and together they discover that Ash is not human, but an android working to carry out the corporation's agenda. After a fierce struggle, they manage to incapacitate and decapitate Ash, who admits in his final moments that his loyalty was always to the corporation's mission, not the crew.

With Ash destroyed, Ripley devises a final plan to destroy the alien and escape. She activates the ship's self-destruct system, planning to abandon the *Nostromo* in a small shuttle. As Ripley prepares the shuttle, she witnesses Lambert and Parker's gruesome deaths at the hands of the alien, leaving her the sole survivor. With time running out, Ripley races to complete the self-destruct sequence and escape.

In the film's climactic sequence, Ripley narrowly manages to board the shuttle and launch herself into space as the *Nostromo* explodes. However, the terror is not over. After the explosion, Ripley discovers that the alien has stowed away on the shuttle. In a tense battle, Ripley manages to lure the xenomorph into the shuttle's airlock and blasts it into space, finally killing the creature. Exhausted and traumatized, Ripley puts herself into stasis, drifting alone through the vast emptiness of space, the sole survivor of the crew's harrowing ordeal.

With the film's narrative and characters now established, a closer examination of key scenes reveals how gendered dynamics play out in specific interactions. These pivotal moments not only highlight the contrast between human adaptability and AI rigidity but also expose the underlying power structures encoded through gender. By analyzing scenes such as the quarantine standoff, the revelation of Special Order #937, and Ash's violent outburst, we can uncover how *ALIEN* uses character behavior and cinematic tension to explore the deeper implications of gendering artificial intelligence.

### **[The quarantine scene] (00:35:08-00:36:15)**

In the quarantine scene, the interactions between Ripley, Dallas, and Lambert reveal a gender-fluid dynamic that challenges traditional expectations about authority, empathy, and emotional response.

Ripley, the warrant officer, demonstrates authority and adherence to protocol. As Kane is brought back to the *Nostromo* with the facehugger attached, Ripley insists on enforcing the quarantine protocol, prioritizing the safety of the entire crew over individual compassion for Kane. Her approach is firm, logical, and assertive, emphasizing procedure over emotion and suggesting a willingness to make difficult decisions for the greater good, which are some qualities often coded as masculine. This behavior diverges from typical feminine-coded traits such as nurturing or empathy, instead aligning her more closely with the qualities of a rational leader who values the crew's collective safety over immediate, personal attachments.

Dallas, the captain, meanwhile, exhibits a contrasting response that is unexpectedly rooted in empathy and personal loyalty. His emotional concern for Kane leads him to challenging Ripley's authority, urging her to open the airlock despite the risk. Dallas's reaction shows a level of emotional openness often coded as feminine, emphasizing care and

a desire to act immediately on behalf of his vulnerable crewmember. Although he holds the highest rank on the ship, his decision here is driven by personal attachment and compassion rather than by protocol, which allows Ripley to momentarily occupy the logical, authoritative role he is expected to fulfill as captain.

Lambert, the navigator, further complicates the scene's gender dynamics by embodying traits of emotional vulnerability. As Kane is brought back, Lambert's reaction is one of visible distress and apprehension, adding a layer of emotional expression that aligns with traditionally feminine-coded responses. Her apprehension contrasts sharply with Ripley's calm and controlled demeanor, highlighting her discomfort with Ripley's strict adherence to protocol. Lambert openly questions Ripley's decision, bringing an emotive and spontaneous voice to the scene that underscores her anxiety and empathy for Kane. Her approach contrasts with Ripley's restraint, showing her to be more openly emotional and less inclined to take the same calculated risks as Ripley does.

Together, Ripley, Dallas, and Lambert's reactions create a scene where traditional gender roles are fluid and challenged. Ripley's logical authority is traditionally coded as masculine, while Dallas's empathy and Lambert's emotional openness are often associated with femininity. By allowing each character to adopt these diverse responses, *ALIEN* challenges conventional portrayals of gender by showing how authority, empathy, and vulnerability are situational rather than fixed traits, creating a layered and realistic dynamic within the crew's high-stakes interaction.

In the quarantine scene, Ash's decision to override Ripley's orders and open the airlock, allowing Kane back onto the ship, is the first significant action that casts doubt on his loyalty and motives. This moment establishes an immediate tension between Ash and Ripley, as she begins to question his commitment to the crew's safety. Ripley's insistence on following quarantine protocol contrasts sharply with Ash's choice to disregard it, raising red flags for her. While Ash initially presents his actions as a compassionate response to Kane's condition, the unexplained defiance subtly implies that he may have an agenda beyond the crew's welfare. This conflict marks the start of Ripley's suspicions, as she observes that Ash's behavior often strays from the protocol-driven approach expected from a science officer.

As the crew's encounters with the alien escalate, Ripley's mistrust of Ash deepens. She begins to notice his strange detachment and his unusual interest in the creature itself, often conducting investigations alone and withholding information from the rest of the crew. This growing suspicion leads Ripley to seek answers from Mother, the ship's mainframe computer. In the next scene, Ripley bypasses Ash and goes directly to Mother, hoping to understand the reasons behind the ship's diverted course and Ash's questionable decisions. This moment is pivotal, as Ripley's reliance on Mother reveals her need for concrete answers—answers that Ash, she realizes, may be intentionally concealing. This sequence builds on the quarantine scene's tension, driving the narrative forward as Ripley moves from initial mistrust to active investigation, ultimately uncovering the corporate agenda that both Mother and Ash are secretly enforcing.

**[Special Order #937] (01:18:40-01:20:30)**

In the scene where Ripley uncovers “Special Order #937” the gender roles of Ash and Mother reflect complex, coded portrayals of power, control, and passive manipulation.

Ash, coded with traditionally masculine characteristics, exercises an overt and active form of control. His freedom of movement allows him to oversee and manipulate situations in real time, enabling him to subtly undermine Ripley’s growing authority. For instance, Ash monitors Ripley’s actions without directly intervening, waiting for the right moment to assert his control. Ash’s intellectual and informational mobility is perhaps even more significant. His ability to navigate between the roles of a loyal crew member and a covert operative demonstrates a flexibility that aligns with traditional masculine traits of dominance and control. These traits extend to his ability to withhold or release information selectively, exercising control over the narrative and maintaining his authority.

In contrast, Mother<sup>7</sup>, as a feminine-coded presence, embodies a passive and indirect form of control. Lacking any physical form, Mother’s mobility is limited to her presence within the ship’s mainframe, and she exists only as an interface. Her restricted mobility aligns with traditional feminine stereotypes of forced confinement, reinforcing her role as a passive overseer rather than an active participant. Furthermore, Mother’s response is carefully controlled and regulated; she does not initiate communication but responds only when accessed by the crew. Her voice is calm, neutral, and devoid of any assertiveness, embodying a type of “feminine” restraint and obedience that contrasts sharply with Ash’s more direct and forceful approach. Even as she follows orders that ultimately jeopardize the crew, Mother remains detached, reflecting an enforced passivity where her “right of speech” is conditional and bound by her programming.

Ash and Mother’s contrasting roles highlight a power dynamic where traditionally masculine and feminine-coded behaviors are both present but operate very differently. Ash’s access to speech and decision-making is unrestricted; he withholds information at will, speaks authoritatively, and actively interferes with Ripley’s investigation. His speech is independent and self-motivated, allowing him to act in a more dominant, manipulative manner. Meanwhile, Mother’s “speech” is highly restricted and controlled. She speaks only when accessed and provides information within tightly defined boundaries. This limitation suggests a feminine-coded restraint, where Mother’s responses are reactive rather than proactive, reinforcing her role as an obedient “caregiver” who serves without question or initiation.

Ash not only possesses physical freedom but also the ability to assert himself forcefully when challenged. His control over the crew’s access to information, seen as he repeatedly withholds key details about the alien and the mission, further highlights a masculine-coded right to control knowledge and speech within the narrative. His later attack

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<sup>7</sup> MOTHER, the Nostromo’s AI (model MU/TH/UR 6000), is a maternally coded computer that guides the crew; however, as the plot unfolds, she prioritizes the company’s secret mission over the crew’s survival.

on Ripley can be seen as a hyper-masculine response to her challenge, relying on physical aggression to reassert dominance when his authority is questioned.

### **[Ash's Attack] (01:21:22-01:23:00)**

When Ripley leaves Mother's interface after discovering the truth about the mission, Ash immediately begins to close off doors, physically trapping her within the confinements of the ship. This act of controlling space underscores Ash's assertion of dominance, as he uses his physical mobility to restrict Ripley's freedom and isolate her from the rest of the crew. This deliberate pursuit reinforces his role as an enforcer of authority, embodying an unchecked, hyper-masculine use of physical control to silence opposition.

As Ripley uncovers *Special Order #937* and directly challenges the authority of both Ash and the corporation, Ash resorts to a violent, symbolic method to subdue her. He takes a magazine, rolls it tightly, and attempts to force it into Ripley's mouth. This act is significant not only because of its physical brutality but also because of its metaphorical weight. The attack reflects an attempt to silence Ripley, literally taking away her ability to speak or resist. The use of the rolled magazine in Ash's attack on Ripley can be interpreted as a subtle yet disturbing reference to sexual assault, reinforcing the scene's gendered power dynamics and themes of control and domination. While the act is not explicitly sexual, its symbolic elements—particularly the phallic shape of the rolled magazine and the invasive act of forcing it into Ripley's mouth—evoke the imagery of sexual violence. In the backdrop of this scene, the posters of women in nudity not only reinforces the objectification of women in this ship but also emphasizes the potential sexual assaults from men to women even more. This method of attack is unsettlingly intimate and degrading, emphasizing Ash's disregard for Ripley's autonomy. It is a deliberate contrast to straightforward physical violence; rather than simply overpowering Ripley, Ash's choice of method underscores his intent to humiliate and suppress her voice.

Ripley's portrayal in this scene continues to challenge and subvert traditional gender stereotypes in science fiction and horror films. Throughout *ALIEN*, Ripley has demonstrated traits often coded as masculine: rationality, assertiveness, and leadership. In this moment, she directly confronts the systemic forces represented by Ash, standing firmly in her pursuit of the truth despite the increasing danger. Her willingness to challenge authority and take decisive action marks her as a progressive female protagonist who breaks away from the passive or secondary roles typically assigned to women in such narratives. However, even as Ripley defies gender expectations, this scene also underscores her vulnerability within the oppressive environment. Ash's attack confines Ripley physically and metaphorically, demonstrating that despite her resilience, she is still subject to the violence and control of those who hold power—whether it's Ash as an individual or the larger corporate system he represents. Ripley's struggle against Ash mirrors a broader societal dynamic where women who challenge authority are often met with forceful attempts to suppress—or even silence—their voices or agency.

This scene is critical in highlighting the limitations imposed on Ripley, even as she emerges as a groundbreaking character. Her confinement and vulnerability in this scene

reflect the systemic barriers that she must overcome to fully assert her agency. Importantly, Ripley's ability to survive this assault, thanks to the intervention of Parker and Lambert, sets the stage for her eventual triumph. This emphasizes her strength not just as a survivor but as a character who continues to fight against oppressive forces, even in the face of overwhelming power.

### III. Conclusion

These scene analyses make clear that *ALIEN* is not simply a film about extraterrestrial horror, but a layered commentary on the ways in which gender and control intersect within human-technology relationships. The behaviors of Ash and Mother, contrasted against the human crew's emotional range and adaptability, underscore the dangers of embedding rigid social norms into artificial systems. With these insights in place, we can now consider the broader implications of *ALIEN*'s message and what it reveals about humanity's evolving relationship with AI.

One of the most striking aspects of *ALIEN* is the ironic contrast between the portrayal of human characters, who display fluid and situational gender roles, and the artificial intelligence systems, which are rigidly confined to traditional gender stereotypes. This juxtaposition serves as a critique of how humanity projects its biases onto its creations while simultaneously demonstrating the capacity to transcend those same limitations.

Human characters in the film, such as Ripley, Dallas, and Lambert, embody a spectrum of gender traits that evolve depending on the situation. Ripley demonstrates assertiveness and rationality often coded as masculine, Dallas reveals empathy and emotional openness commonly associated with femininity, and Lambert exhibits vulnerability and fear in ways that reflect traditional feminine stereotypes. However, their responses are dynamic and context-driven, showing that human gender expression is flexible and not bound by rigid roles. This portrayal emphasizes humanity's ability to adapt, grow, and challenge societal norms, presenting a progressive view of gender as fluid rather than binary.

In stark contrast, the AI systems—Ash and Mother—are depicted in rigid, exaggerated gender contexts that align with traditional stereotypes. Mother, coded with feminine traits, is passive, nurturing, and confined to a supportive, reactive role. Her lack of physical form and limited autonomy reinforce the trope of the silent, obedient caregiver. Ash, on the other hand, embodies hyper-masculine traits of informational dominance, physical mobility, and aggressive control. His calculated withholding of information and later violent outburst reflect a stereotypical assertion of male power, making his actions predictable within a traditional gender framework. Unlike the humans, the AI characters lack the capacity for growth or deviation from these roles, highlighting how their programming locks them into reductive stereotypes.

The irony lies in how these rigid gender portrayals in AI are the result of human design. Despite humanity's capacity for breaking gender norms, the AI systems reflect the biases of their creators, embodying traditional and static roles that contrast sharply with the human characters' fluidity. This suggests that while humans have the ability to redefine their own

identities, they often fail to extend that same complexity to the systems and technologies they create. By encoding rigid gender roles into AI, humanity projects its historical biases onto its creations, perpetuating stereotypes that human characters in the film are shown to overcome.

This ironic divide raises important questions about humanity's relationship with technology. Why, in a narrative where humans demonstrate the capacity to transcend societal norms, are artificial beings restricted to outdated stereotypes? *ALIEN* suggests that this contradiction reflects deeper anxieties about control and identity. AI, programmed to serve human interests, is confined to traditional roles to ensure predictability and subservience. Meanwhile, the human characters' ability to adapt and defy norms highlights the tension between freedom and control—showing that while humans can challenge and evolve beyond societal constraints, their creations often remain trapped within the limitations of their designers' imaginations.

Ultimately, *ALIEN* critiques this disparity by exposing the rigid gender roles imposed on AI as a reflection of human failings, even as the film celebrates humanity's capacity to transcend those same constraints. This irony deepens the film's exploration of power, identity, and autonomy, offering a thought-provoking commentary on how gender and control are intertwined in both human and artificial realms.

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