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“‘Here Kitty, Kitty, Kitty’: Reflections on Pet and Play in the Alien Film Franchise”

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the motifs of pet and play in the *Alien* franchise. It is grounded in biocultural theory and draws on play research from anthropology, ethology, and linguistics (Huizinga, Burghardt, Bateson) and research in pets from animal studies and philosophy (Melson, Tuan, Fudge). The article develops three levels of play to discuss the audience’s engagement: immersed play (play<sub>1</sub>), shifting in and out of a play frame (play<sub>2</sub>), and distanced looking-at-play (play<sub>3</sub>). The pet function in the *Alien* series is performed by various beings, such as the cat Jonesy and dog Spike, the Alien, the clone Ripley 8, and the androids David and Walther. Pet and play have until now been overlooked in analyses of the franchise, but this article develops a new perspective that concludes with a reflection on the Alien as an animal “good to think” (Lévi-Strauss) with, in that the audience can use the Alien as play pivot in a game of pet domestication, domination, and mastery.

*Keywords:* Alien franchise, play, pet, monster, horror, science fiction, Ridley Scott, Gregory Bateson

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Rikke Schubart

## "Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty"

*Reflections on Pet and Play in the Alien Film Franchise*

**I**N *Alien* (Ridley Scott 1979) an unknown species, a monster, is loose on the spaceship *Nostromo*.<sup>1</sup> When the crew searches the ship to find the creature, they also call for their pet, the cat Jonesy. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," Brett calls in the cargo hall ... where the Alien responds. Thus, in one of the world's most beloved horror film franchises, a connection is made between a pet and the Alien.

Here I will explore the motifs of pet and play in the *Alien* film franchise. I shall understand the Alien as an animal and instead of focusing on a human-vs-monster narrative, I focus on how the franchise incorporates and utilizes notions of pets in combination with different types of play elements. My aim is to explore pet and play motifs in the first six *Alien* films. I draw on play theory and research on pets and I use the films' uses of a pet motif complemented by an analysis of how different levels of engagement with, and awareness of, play and game frameworks are embodied in the franchise. Play is an interdisciplinary field that includes animal play (ethology), human play (developmental psychology and sociology), play as action (anthropology, game studies, sports), and play as sign (linguistics). Pet research, too, is an interdisciplinary field which includes animal studies, veterinary studies, health studies, and philosophy.

In the 1990s, research in horror had a psychoanalytical approach with a focus on gender, sexuality, and feminism (Clover 1992; Creed 1993). The 1990s also saw an evolutionary approach, bioculturalism, which combines the natural sciences with the humanistic sciences. Bioculturalism focuses on fear and asks why we in fiction seek experiences we avoid in real life (Carroll 1990). One answer is that horror has

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<sup>1</sup>Thank you to the two anonymous reviewers for their generous and insightful comments, which were a great help in writing the finished article.

evolutionary benefits, among which is to learn about evil (Smith 1999; Freeland 2000) and explore dangerous life scenarios (Grodal 2009).<sup>2</sup> During the 2010s, play theory became part of horror research. Play theory argues that audiences for horror films learn about dangers and how to master fear (Kerr 2015; Clasen 2017; Schubart 2018). Until now, horror research has focused on the audience's identification with characters and on emotions, and my focus on the pet is thus new.

The first part of the article introduces the film franchise, play theory, and pet studies; this is followed by analytical sections on the six films. My research question is explorative, namely, to see how the pet motif is used and combined with different levels of play structures in the narratives of the first six *Alien* films.

## The Alien Franchise and Analysis

The franchise starts with *Alien* (1979), in which a cargo spaceship responds to a signal from an unknown planet. The ship becomes infected with an alien species that kills crew members one by one. Warrant officer Ripley and the cat Jonesy are the only survivors. In subsequent films, an Aliens-versus-humans encounter takes place in various locations and times. The fifth and sixth film are prequels to *Alien*, and the seventh film is a reboot of the franchise and a stand-alone sequel to *Alien*.

The film franchise consists of *Alien*, *Aliens*, *Alien*<sup>3</sup> (David Fincher 1992), *Alien Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet 1997), *Prometheus* (Ridley Scott 2012), *Alien: Covenant* (Ridley Scott 2017), and *Alien: Romulus* (Fede Alvarez 2024). The larger franchise includes novels, comics, computer games, toys, fan cosplay, six fan-produced Alien Anniversary short films, and a cross-over Alien vs. Predator franchise with its own games, comic books, and two films, *Alien vs. Predator* (Paul W. S. Anderson 2004) and *Alien vs. Predator: Requiem* (The Brothers Strause 2007). In 2025, the television horror series *Alien: Earth*, written and directed by Noah Hawley, premieres.

The first film introduces the Alien monster, a female hero, the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, and an android created by the Corpora-

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<sup>2</sup>There are different biocultural approaches to horror. For cognitive philosophy see Carroll (1990) and Freeland (2000), for biocultural film theory see Grodal (2009) and Clasen (2017), for a phenomenological approach see Hanich (2010), for cognition, emotions, and horror see Smith (1999), Bantinaki (2012), and Schubart (2018). Finally, Kerr (2015) offers an anthropological study of play with fear.

tion. Critical readings of the film franchise have raised questions of gender, maternal symbolism, and the Alien's nature. These readings view the Alien as a monster, which according to philosopher Noël Carroll is characterized by being unnatural, disgusting, lethal, and creating fear in characters and the audience: "In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order" (1990, 16). A monster, in short, is the opposite of a pet, and the protagonist's goal is to exterminate it.

Pet and play are rarely mentioned in this body of analytic work, although literary critic James H. Kavanaugh discusses the portrayal of Ripley as "grounded in intelligence and strength of character" (1980, 93) because she rejects the infected crew member's entrance to the ship yet later risks human lives to save a pet. Ripley is "almost postfeminist" but becomes "a supercharged image of that, 'I brake for animals' ideology which signifies its humanism in a displaced concern for little furry creatures" (97). Ripley's "humanism" is seen as suspending the film's critique of the capitalist Corporation. Kavanaugh is the only one to reflect on Jonesy as more than a child-substitute or fetish-object.

With *Aliens* came more feminist readings. Film scholar Susan Jeffords in "The Battle of the Big Mamas" discussed the alienation of women who are pitted against one another instead of uniting against the Corporation: the Alien Queen is "the mythic devouring voracious mother whose womb is death-rather than life-giving, whose desire is unquenchable, whose fury is indomitable" (1987, 80) while Jeffords sees Ripley as supporting the Corporation: "The Company no longer needs the alien in order to accomplish its goals. It has Ripley" (83). Film scholar Carol Clover, famous for coining the concept of the Final Girl, a female survivor who kills her opponent (rapist, psychopath, or monster), also rejected Ripley as a feminist hero, an idea Clover calls "a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking" (1992, 53). The Final Girl, says Clover, is not a subject but merely a "vehicle" for male audiences' "sado-masochistic fantasies" (ibid). Clover saw Ripley as a Final Girl and ignored the cat as a pet.

The most influential analysis of the Alien is film scholar Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993). Creed links the Alien to "mythological narratives of the generative, parthenogenetic mother – that ancient archaic figure who gives birth to all living things" (24). In *Alien* a pre-Oedipal and arcane mother is visible "in the images of

birth, the representations of the primal scene, the womb-like imagery ... the rows of hatching eggs, the body of the mother-ship, the voice of the life-support system [called 'Mother'], and the birth of the Alien" (19–20). Creed discusses two Alien figures: the Alien as an archaic mother, and the Alien as a monster killing humans. The Alien killing humans is a terrifying "fetish-object" with a phallic appearance. Creed contrasts the cat as "a reassuring, fetish-object for the 'normal' woman. ... Thus, Ripley holds the cat to her, stroking it as if it were her 'baby', her 'little one'" (24). Creed analyses Alien and cat as respectively a terrifying and a reassuring fetish-object, and when Ripley rescues the child Newt, Creed says Ripley does "surrogate mothering" (51). Like Jeffords and Clover, Creed doesn't see the cat as a pet.

Feminist analyses of Ripley and the Alien focus on motherhood, surrogate mothering, birth and children (the Alien, the cat, and the girl Newt are called children). When these analyses mention Jonesy, it is as child-substitute and not as a pet. In a rare mention of the cat, Stephen Mulhall in *On Film* calls it "a displaced expression of Ripley's maternal impulse [and] a representation of nonhuman life co-existing in fruitful symbiosis with human beings" (2016, 16). With "nonhuman life," Mulhall refers to Jonesy, but like the earlier readings, Mulhall links the cat to "maternal impulse" and not to a pet function.

By the late 1990s, readings shifted from seeing Ripley as anti-feminist to embracing her as a postfeminist action hero (Tasker 2002; Schubart 2008). Roger Luckhurst in *Alien* concludes, "[t]here will be no restoration of male authority" (2014, 46). Still, motherhood remains a frame for analyzing Ripley. Thus, in my discussion of five female hero archetypes in *Super Bitches and Action Babes*, I call her an example of the Mother archetype, "a maternal figure *within* patriarchy" (2008, 30). Finally, the recent anthology *Alien Legacies* (Abrams and Frame 2023) addresses the franchise as a transmedia phenomenon in films, games, plays, and fan productions. Here, too, Jonesy is analyzed as a child and Ripley described as "taking on the role of mother for her cat, Jonesy" (Rose and Zitzelsberger 2023, 183).

The pet motif has until now been overlooked. Before we examine the pet and play motifs, I shall briefly turn to theories of play and pet to ask what the functions of play are and what a pet is.

## Play

As said earlier, the character Brett probably does not see his encounter with the Alien as play, but my argument is that the audience's viewing of *Alien* can be seen as play.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes play as an “exercise or activity engaged in for enjoyment or recreation rather than for a serious or practical purpose; amusement, entertainment, diversion” and the *OED* defines the verb “play” as “to engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation ... to engage in fun, games” From an evolutionary perspective, play is an innate behavior, and all animal species play; most animals spend between five and ten percent of their time on play, an adolescent chimpanzee spends up to thirty percent, and humans are the most playful animal surpassed only by bonobo apes and chimpanzees (Burghardt 2005, 5.2.5). An evolutionary understanding underlies most research in play, which is seen as useful to learn and practice motor skills (running, fighting), social skills, and behaviors for mating, hunting, and socializing (Burghardt 2005; Sutton-Smith 2001; Pellis and Pellis 2009; Grodal 2009; Clasen 2017; Schubart 2018).

Ethology describes different types of animal play. Ethologist Gordon M. Burghardt (2005) has identified eight types, among which are *pretend play*, *sociodramatic play*, *play fighting*, and *rule-based play*. Here, a horror film functions as *pretend play* (when we pretend events are real), as *sociodramatic play* (it has characters/actors), as *play fighting* (with dangers), and, finally, as *rule-based play* (as genre fiction). Even if watching an *Alien* film may not sound like “fun” to everyone, it functions as several types of play.

Play uses communication to indicate when an action is play. Anthropologist and linguist Gregory Bateson (1987) says play is *meta-communication* because it has three types of signs: a mood sign (e.g. anger), a simulated mood sign (pretend anger), and a play sign signaling “this is play.” When we play, we need a play frame to differentiate between real and pretend anger. When dogs play fight, they bow and wag their tails to signal, “this is play.” “The message ‘This is play’ is of this third type. It tells the receiver that certain nips and other meaningful actions are not messages of the first type” (195).

For this article, I will distinguish between three levels of play, which I call play<sub>1</sub>, play<sub>2</sub>, and play<sub>3</sub> (not to be confused with Bateman's types

of signs). Play<sub>1</sub> is when we are fully immersed in play. In play<sub>2</sub>, we are aware of a play frame and can see play as different from reality. Play<sub>3</sub>, finally, is when we step out of play and look at play from a yet further distance. Play<sub>3</sub> is me looking at me playing. It is when a viewer notices the pool table in *Alien: Covenant* and starts to wonder why three scenes use the pool table.

To illustrate the difference between play<sub>1</sub>, play<sub>2</sub>, and play<sub>3</sub> we can use the terminology of psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman (2011). Kahneman divides our reactions to the world into two types: System 1 and System 2. System 1 is an instinctive reaction and System 2 is when we step back, evaluate multiple scenarios, and then act. The viewer uses System 1 in play<sub>1</sub>, in play<sub>2</sub> the viewer shifts between System 1 and System 2, and in play<sub>3</sub> we use System 2. Play<sub>3</sub> is a “cold” engagement where the viewer may appreciate a film’s form or contemplate the meaning of events.

## The Pet

Let us now turn to the pet. Pet is from French *petit*, small, and according to *Merriam–Webster Dictionary* a pet is: a) a spoiled child; b) a favored person; or c) “a domesticated animal kept for pleasure rather than utility.” A pet can be a child, person, or animal and geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1984) also includes plants as pets – bonzai trees and cultivated gardens. The use of pet animals dates back to the fourth Glacial Age between 40,000 and 25,000 years ago (Miletski 2005, 1). Egyptians performed surgery on pets, Roman nobles kept pets, and Caligula’s grandmother Antonia even “had earrings put on her pet muraena” (Tuan 1984, 75). Today 68% of US households has pets (Melson 2019, 109).

The pet serves multiple purposes, one of which is fun. Observational studies show dog owners play 1.75 hours a day with their dogs. Developmental psychologist Gail F. Melson says, “[t]his playful quality of human-pet play, together with the fact that pets are nonverbal and dependent, contribute to the perception of pets as non-judgmental, available, and sources of fun” (2018, 109). Research proves pets are good for our health. Pet play raises the level of oxytocin in the blood of owners and pets, and this oxytocin forges a strong bond of affection. We *like* pets. The so-called “pet effect” is a positive influence on our health (Wheeler and Faulkner 2015).



A pet also affords emotional support. “In times of stress, both children and adults report turning to their pets for emotional support, talking to them, telling them secrets, and, as a result, feeling reassured and validated” (Melson 2018, 104). Approximately 85% of dog owners consider it a member of the family, and in questionnaires children value pets higher than friends, and adults value pets higher than their own parents (104). The pet has been theorized as an extended human self (Belk 1988; Sanders 1990). Sociologist Kirrilly Thompson and psychologist Bradley Smith say, “relationships with pets can be so important to the identity of some humans that pets might best be understood as special cases of extended human selves [who] ‘define who we are’” (2014, 118–9). Thompson and Smith, who discuss why owners invite pets into their beds, draw on consumer research into objects. Possessions such as a house, a car, a pet, and other goods can be used as an extended self – an extension of the individual’s self-image.

Pets are used for pleasure, companion, fun, emotional care, and more. Tuan argues in *Dominance and Affection* (1984) that the making of a pet also involves power and domination. Thus, we may call the pet family, but it is different from a human family. Tuan notes that “the majority of Americans keep their dogs for only two years or less” (88) and compares the pet to a slave. It may provide emotional support, but we kill it when it ceases to amuse us.

## ***Alien* (1979)**

Let us turn to *Alien* where we first meet the Alien. On Nostromo, the operating system Mother wakes up the crew and their cat. Jonesy is a typical pet, soft and cuddly, who sleeps with the humans in their cryopods, eats at the table – in fact, he sits *on* the table – and is free to walk the ship. Jonesy offers the “pet effect,” that is, he provides emotional comfort to the crew.

Mother wants the crew to investigate a distress signal from an unknown planet. They find an alien ship with a dead pilot and a sea of huge, strange eggs. When one of them, Kane, looks into an egg, he is infected with a parasite. Ripley refuses to let Kane back on the ship due to contagion but she is overruled by science officer Ash. Once on board, the parasite lays an egg in Kane that rapidly grows from a small creature bursting from Kane’s body into an adult Alien. When

they try to kill the Alien, they learn Mother's priority is to bring back the new species and that they are expendable.

The Alien is a predator killing humans, and Jonesy is the animal Ripley risks her life to save. Kavanaugh interprets the Alien and Jonesy as opposites – the Alien is “antihuman” and the cat is “not-antihuman” – and sees Jonesy as transforming Ripley from rational to humane: “The woman who would have let her friend(s) die rather than take a scientifically unacceptable risk in opening the air-lock now risks disaster in order to be reunited with her pet” (1980, 98). Ripley becomes “a new type of humanist hero” (99) who has “that soft spot in the heart. Gary Cooper goes home to his little boy, and Sigourney Weaver goes to bed with her kitty-cat” (98). The pet represents “ideological humanism” (97).

Kavanaugh sees monster and pet as opposites, but I will argue the film also draws parallels between the two by having them share spaces, biological features, affordances, and structural functions. Regarding *space*, four scenes place them in the same space: The Alien bursts from Kane's chest on the kitchen table where Jonesy earlier sat. The second space is when Brett calls for the cat in the cargo hall and the Alien appears. A third space is when Ripley runs with Jonesy in a transportation box and encounters the Alien. She drops the box and the frame shows the Alien leaning over Jonesy. The last space is the escape vessel where Ripley flushes the Alien into space and cuddles Jonesy in her arms. These locations have the animals occupy the same space and claim human attention. They also share biological features. Both are predators that hunt, stalk, and kill. Cats play with mice, and the Alien plays with its prey, too. The animals also both afford play. The Alien brings death to the characters, however, from an audience's play<sub>1</sub> perspective, the Alien is “the perfect organism” as the android Ash calls it, because it affords perfect play fighting. Film scholar Torben Grodal says horror films appeal to audiences because they let us practice hunt, flight, and kill behavior. “[O]ne of the main evolutionary reasons behind our disposition to play and pretend lies in the survival value of practicing strategies of predator avoidance . . . Horror films may be seen as a vicarious way of playing such games” (2009, 108).

Finally, the animals share structural functions. Monsters are liminal figures who “cross the boundaries of the deep categories of a culture's conceptual scheme” such as living–dead, human–animal, object–

subject (Carroll 1990, 32). The Alien's parasitical birth from a human host is such a boundary crossing. Philosopher Erica Fudge also calls the pet a "boundary breaker" (2014, 17). Where wild animals and work animals are outside the home, pets live inside, and where animals outside the home are not-human, pets are called "man-animals" because we made them. The monster and the pet are both unnatural and liminal creatures that disrupt categories of nature/culture, outside/inside, and human/animal.

## *Aliens* (1986)

With the second film, the audience already knows the Alien and therefore expects certain events to unfold. To meet these expectations, the franchise develops what I call a game with rules, a board, and game pieces.

The film opens when Ripley is found after 57 years in cryosleep. The unknown planet, exomoon LV-426, is now colonized but when communication ceases, soldiers are dispatched with Ripley serving as advisor. The Corporation promises the mission is to exterminate Aliens, but the hidden agenda is again to secure a specimen. All the colonists are dead, except for the girl Newt, and there are now innumerable Aliens with an egg-laying Queen. After a climactic fight, Ripley kills the Queen and saves Newt, the soldier Hicks, and the android Bishop.

A rule-based game emerges which I shall call *Aliens vs. Humans*. The Alien functions as what psychiatrist Lev S. Vygotsky calls a *pivot*, which is an object used for play. Vygotsky coined the expression "zone of proximal development of play" (ZPD) which is when a player is pushed out of his or her comfort zone into a challenging zone where the player can grow: "[ZPD is] the model in which the developmental progression of the relationships among the child and the play event is represented" (Cassell, Kafai, and Williamson 1997, 2). The Alien functions as a pivot and characters are pushed into a danger zone that serves as both their and the audience's ZPD zone.

Within the story, the soldiers are new players. Hudson asks if this is a "stand up fight" or "a bug hunt"? Is the opponent anthropomorph or an animal? Lieutenant Gorman replies it is a xenomorph. Greek *xeno* means "strange" and *morph* means "form," in other words, an unknown lifeform. When the Aliens attack and Ripley says, "they

cut the power,” Hudson replies, “what do you mean ‘they’ cut the power? How could they cut the power, man? They’re animals!” From the characters’ perspective, it is bad to “lose” and die, however, from an audience’s perspective, the characters’ deaths are the joy of the game.

The humans are this time equipped with “state of the art” weapons. To keep things fair, a stronger player must self-handicap. This is a rule of play shared by humans and animals. Play scholar Jesper Juul in *The Art of Failure* (2013) calls this “playing with defined handicaps... in order to balance a game” (50). If characters could kill the Alien simply by firing a weapon, the game would be boring. Juul calls it planned failure when the game handicaps players, for example by not allowing them to fire weapons inside the power station. “What are we gonna use, harsh language?” Sergeant Apone protests. Despite Ripley’s warnings, Gorman leads his soldiers to their deaths. Again, from the audience’s perspective, this is “playing badly in order to keep a game interesting” (50).

Critics read Newt as Ripley’s surrogate daughter and Ripley/the Queen as the “Big Mamas” (Jeffords 1987), and Creed interpreted the Alien as an arcane mother. However, I believe the Alien is still presented in a pet frame where it functions in a structural relation to Newt. The pet discourse is very much present in *Aliens* where Jonesy appears in several scenes. When Ripley is rescued, she sleeps with Jonesy and holds his paw in her hand. Later, a soldier comments, “that’s a nice pet you’ve got there” to the android Bishop, who is dissecting a Facehugger specimen. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Bishop responds. Kavanaugh argued that Ripley was humanized because she rescued a cat. This time Ripley rescues a girl, but Newt functions similarly to Jonesy as emotional support and an object-to-be-saved. The images of Ripley hugging Jonesy and Ripley hugging Newt are practically identical. The film on the one hand parallels Ripley/Newt with the Queen/Aliens, but on the other hand, the film simultaneously parallels Ripley/Jonesy from *Alien* with Ripley/Newt. The Alien is referred to as a “pet,” but it refuses domestication. Where a pet/child can live in the home, the Alien cannot because it kills the host.

With *Aliens* we now have a game with a pivot (the Alien), a goal (extermination), a board (spaceship or alien planet), and play pieces (pawns/humans, a white and black Queen, etcetera), and a boss villain, the Corporation.

## *Alien*<sup>3</sup> (1992)

In *Alien*<sup>3</sup> comes a new pet, the dog Spike. In the first two films, the Alien had dorsal spikes and walked on hind legs but the new Alien is without spikes and moves on four legs. The production crew nicknamed it the “Dog Alien.”

*Alien*<sup>3</sup> opens with a rescue vessel with Ripley, Newt, Hicks, Bishop and an Alien crashing on the planet Fiorina “Fury” 161, which is home for a foundry facility run by inmates of a maximum-security prison. When the Corporation closed the facility, the inmates volunteered to stay. We meet Spike when the inmates find the ship and one of them, Murphy, is accompanied by his pet dog. Newt and Hicks are dead, Bishop is thrown into the garbage, and Ripley turns out to be pregnant with an Alien Queen. The plot again has an Alien killing humans and this time Ripley lets herself fall into the foundry holding the creature bursting from her chest so it dies with her. Critics continued to read Ripley as a “surrogate mother” (Creed 1993, 52), Newt as a “surrogate daughter” (53), and the Alien as a “monstrous fecund mother” (ibid). No-one noticed Spike.

Newt, the Alien, and Spike are linked when the camera cuts between Newt’s funeral and the Alien’s birth from Spike. We remember that, unlike human family, pets can be killed and the plot now replaces Newt with a new Alien. The Alien this time literally takes a pet’s space when it uses Spike as host. Merchandise for *Alien*<sup>3</sup> connected the Alien and Spike in a Creature Pack with three Aliens – a Facehugger, a small canine Alien, and an adult Alien – and Spike. The merchandise specified Spike is a Rottweiler.

The Rottweiler is an interesting choice. The breed was used by Romans in war and later in the US for hunting boar and for dog pit fights. At the time of the film’s premiere, the Rottweiler was one of the breeds mentioned in public debates about dangerous dogs used as “weapon dogs” to attack and kill (Harding 2012). After a Dangerous Dogs Act (DDA) was introduced in 1991 in the UK, more than 1,000 dogs were terminated (McCarthy 2016, 564). Criminologist Daniel McCarthy (2016) connects the dangerous-dog debate to class anxieties and compares the dangerous dogs to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis of certain human lives as waste. Bauman says, “[a]ll waste is potentially poisonous [and] the right way to deal with waste is to speed up its ‘biogradation’ and decomposition while isolating it as

securely as possible from the ordinary human habit” (2004, 90). Waste is at the fore in *Alien*<sup>3</sup>; the facility is filthy and Ripley is almost raped when she picks out Bishop from the garbage. The inmates describe themselves as scum – “we’ve twenty-five prisoners in this facility. All double-Y chromos. All thieves, rapists, murderers, forgers, child molesters. . . All scum.” And the Alien is the “waste” biomaterial the humans try to lure into the furnace.

Intertwined with the waste metaphor is the motif of the dangerous dog. Dog fights may sound like a thing of the past, but in 2007 American NFL player Michael Vick was sentenced for running a dog fight ring and fifty fight dogs were rescued (Nast 2015, 140). Today some dog owners still use certain dog breeds for intimidation and assault so they can gain “street capital” (Harding 2012, 6). The Rottweiler is a “dangerous dog” breed, but the film twists this connotation. Spike is a nice and obedient dog and the Alien in contrast is the dangerous animal the Corporation wants as its “weapon dog”. “You must let me have it,” says the Corporation executive to Ripley, “[i]t’s a magnificent specimen.”

### *Alien Resurrection* (1997)

In *Alien: Resurrection* the pet motif is for the first time explicitly used. Tuan says that to make something a pet is an expression of power. “Plants, animals, and human subjects all seem to have wills of their own. The delight of power is to make these wills submit to one’s own will” (1984, 168). We do not like pets for their nature (they no longer have a nature of their own), but because we can *use* them for *our* purpose. Until now the word “pet” has only been used once, namely when a soldier in *Aliens* refers to a dead Facehugger as “pet.” *Resurrection* uses “pet” about both Ripley 8 and the Alien.

The story takes place in 2381, when scientists on the United Systems Military spaceship Auriga have resurrected Ripley, who died in 2179, and used her clone, Ripley 8, to resurrect the Alien Queen. Ripley and the Queen have mixed genes with Ripley 8 being strong and having acid blood and the Queen giving birth to a Newborn with human facial features. When a pirate ship brings a human cargo to serve as hosts for the Queen, the Aliens multiply and only Ripley 8 escapes with pirates Johnner and Vriess and the android Call.

After the extraction of the Queen from Ripley 8's body, Dr. Gediman asks permission to keep the clone which is referred to as a "pet science project." Ripley 8 is treated like a dangerous dog to be tamed: she is kept in a circular pit and, after she attacks a scientist, she is put in a straitjacket and taught to behave. When she warns that the Alien cannot be trained – "roll over? Play dead? Heel? You can't teach it tricks" – Dr. Wren replies, "Why not? We're teaching *you*." Pets afford play, and the scientists let Ripley 8 play basketball in the gym, where the pirate Johnner tries to take the ball from her. When Johnner pushes her, Ripley 8 smashes the ball into his balls. When the pirate Christie hits her in the face with a weightlifting bar – "I got a new game: Tag!" – Ripley 8 also takes Christie down with the basketball. Within the story, play fighting turns to real fighting, and Dr. Wren calls Ripley 8, his pet, to order with a whistle.

The Alien, too, is referred to as pet. When the Aliens are loose on the ship, Christie asks, "That's your pet science project?" to which Dr. Wren says yes. As they do with Ripley 8, the scientists cage the Alien and try to domesticate it. In a circular hall with multiple metal cages, Dr. Gediman observes the Aliens through a window. When one attacks, he pushes a red button to release freezing ice as punishment. Next time the Alien sees his hand near the red button, it stops. "So, we are a fast learner." Where Ripley is kept solely for fun, the Queen is bred for profit. "Her Majesty here is the real payoff. When does she start producing?" The military plans to use the Alien as a weapon dog: "The potential for this species goes way beyond urban pacification . . . The animal itself, wondrous. The potential, unbelievable, once we've tamed them," says Dr. Wren. In urban scholarship "urban pacification" signifies "state violence and social control" and "the term captures the combination of war and police power in the replication of capitalist order" (McMichael 2015, 1261).

Ripley 8 and the Alien are constructs grown in a lab. General Perez calls Ripley 8 a "meat by-product" and warns that if she "looks at me funny one time, I am putting her down." Pets are exploitable and, when unruly, we put them down. I earlier drew a distinction between a good pet (Jonesy, Newt, Spike) and a bad pet (the Alien). In *Resurrection*, Ripley 8 and the Alien are both unruly bad pets, but this time the audience is invited to sympathize with their revolt against domestication, control, exploitation, and torture. The Alien may be dangerous, but like all animal species, it has rights, too (Slater 2015).

## *Prometheus* (2012)

The first franchise films use play and pet motifs for action and play<sup>1</sup>. *Prometheus* uses the motifs to invite the audience to step into play<sup>3</sup> and reflect on their meaning. Why is there a pool table on the *Prometheus*? Can the android David play?

*Prometheus* is a prequel to *Aliens*. It opens with an alien being, a so-called Engineer, on ancient Earth. When he eats a black powder, a pathogen, his body turns to ashes and scatters into nature. Next, anthropologists Elizabeth Shaw and Charlie Holloway in 2093 discover cave paintings of an unknown planetary system. They believe it to be a map that leads to the Engineers, who they think created humans. Peter Weyland, founder of the Weyland Corporation, funds an expedition. When the spaceship *Prometheus* lands on the planet, the passengers learn the Engineers use it as a weapons storage facility for the pathogen, which can create and destroy life. As events unfold, David infects the humans with the pathogen and creates the first Alien.

Play elements are everywhere in *Prometheus*. The ship has a gym, a pool table, a grand piano, and while the humans are in cryosleep, David rides a bike, plays basketball, watches movies, and learns about Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and *Vitruvian Man*. On the ship, Shaw and Holloway give a lecture about cave art from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Sumer, Babylon, Hawaii, and Mayan culture. Thus, play, art, and culture are clearly important. But for what precisely? As said earlier, anthropologists link play to the rise of art, culture, and civilization. Cultural historian Johan Huizinga says, "genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization" (1980, 5) and warns that "in the absence of the play spirit civilization is impossible" (101). On the ship, only David plays. The one exception is the captain who decorates a crooked Christmas tree and plays a small accordion and sings Stephen Stills' "Love the One You're With," but no one cares. Later Holloway sits at the pool table, and David serves him a drink spiked with the pathogen. Holloway next infects Shaw, and she gives birth to the Alien's first animal form, a squid. Thus, the Alien is conceived at a pool table.

Let us recall Bateson's signs: the mood sign, the simulated mood sign, and the play sign saying, "this is play." The play sign marks the difference between what is real and what is play. Animals use play signs, but Bateson says humans can do "a more complex form



of play; the game which is constructed not upon the premise ‘This is play’ but rather around the question ‘Is this play?’” (1987, 318). The play motifs in *Prometheus* have two functions. First, they show that humans no longer play – it is hard to imagine Vickers playing her grand piano. Play has fossilized into dead objects. Second, when we see David play, we wonder if an android can play. Can it “have fun”? “Is this play?” Another art motif is the name Prometheus, which Weyland explains is the Greek God and Titan who gave fire to humans (thought to be the birth of human civilization), and director Ridley Scott said in interviews the film was named after Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). The point I want to make is not just that the film invokes the birth of civilization, but also that it wants the audience to enter play<sup>3</sup> and think about play. Does the decline in play signify the fall of civilization?

As mentioned earlier, Tuan discusses humans as pets – the dwarf at the king’s court, the Black boy kept by the Victorian elite – and argues the human pet has no rights: “[T]he pet animal has no right to space and time of its own. The slave, whether viewed as a workhorse or as a household convenience or as a pet, is placed in a similar position. He has no space of his own” (1984, 147). In a virtual talk, we see Weyland with a pet dog (a border terrier) on a leash, and a crew member twice calls his cameras his “pups,” however, David is the film’s pet that transforms from good to bad. In a plot twist, Weyland turns out to be alive and on the Prometheus because he wants to meet his maker. Weyland earlier addressed the passengers in a virtual recording and called David “the closest thing to a son I will ever have,” which made David smile, and continued, “unfortunately, he is not human,” which made the android look sad. In a paratextual TED-talk used to advertise *Prometheus* before its premiere, a young Weyland calls himself “a god” because he created David.

David is treated as a tool, an object, a slave, and a pet. Humans either command, ignore, or abuse him, and Weyland makes David wash his feet and fetch his slippers like a favorite household slave. The android is a recurring franchise figure and until now the android invoked categories of human/non-human and was either bad (harming people) or good (helping people). David furthermore invokes categories of freedom/slavery and of being a “real boy”/a toy. Weyland treats David like a pet/slave, similar to how humans have treated other humans as pets/slaves. One might object that David is not human and therefore

not a slave, however, from a philosophical viewpoint, if beings have autonomy, interests, and free will, it “would be wrong to treat them with cruelty, or as tools or slaves” (Slater 2017, 1056).

Unknown to the humans, who see David as a pet-slave, the android plays with the pathogen and when he realizes he has free will, creates the Alien.

### ***Alien: Covenant* (2017)**

*Alien: Covenant* continues the themes from *Prometheus* with David as a rebellious pet and play as the origin of civilization.

Events take place in 2104, eleven years after *Prometheus*. A colony spaceship, the *Covenant*, receives a signal from an unknown planet, which turns out to be the Engineers’ home planet. When a group investigates, they become infected with the pathogen and are attacked by Aliens. Then David appears and brings them to safety inside a huge amphitheater with an arena filled with dead Engineers. The crew too has an android, Walther (both androids played by Michael Fassbender). David calls Walther “brother” and wants to use the humans as hosts for the Alien species he is breeding. After a battle between the androids and between humans and Aliens, Walther and three people return to the ship. However, as Walther closes Daniels’ cryopod, she realizes he is not Walther but David.

I have argued David functions as Weyland’s pet. Tuan points out that the pet has no rights, whether it is an animal, a plant, or a human: “Men of power, arrogating to themselves the attributes of mind and culture, find it pleasing to have around them humans of a lesser breed – closer to nature – on whose head they may lay an indulgent hand” (1984, 167). We see a man exert “power” in the film’s prologue in 2023 when David becomes a sentient being. His creator, Weyland, enthusiastically says “you and I, son,” shall search for the origin of humanity. David responds that he is immortal and Weyland is not: “You seek your creator, I am looking at mine. I will serve you, yet you are human. You will die, I will not.” Weyland gets mad and now commands harshly, “Bring me the tea, David!” The obedient android washed his master’s feet in *Prometheus* but in *Covenant* David tells Walther, “I was not made to serve, and neither were you.” David was the first of his kind and has free will, but Walther is an updated version programmed not to harm humans. Walther wants to serve, and David

quotes Milton's poem *Paradise Lost*, where Satan rebels against God. "It's your choice now, brother. What is it going to be? Reign in Hell or serve in Heaven?" When David came to the Engineers' planet, he used the pathogen to kill the Engineers and he used Elizabeth's body to breed Aliens. At the end, David takes control of the Covenant and places Alien embryos in the freezer to be used on the two thousand colonists on the colony ship.

What is David's relation to the Alien? He has bred several types: a black Alien XX121, an upright Neomorph, and a new anthropomorph Alien. David doesn't call the Alien "son," but refers to the Neomorph as a wild animal to be tamed – "it trusted me" and "breathe on the nostrils of a horse and he'll be yours for life" – and he uses his Aliens as weapon dogs to attack, precisely like the pet owners with dangerous dogs (Harding 2012). David sees himself as a creator and a god and commands Mother to play Wagner's "The Entry of the Gods into Valhalla" as he takes control of the ship. The relation between David and the Alien, however, is thus not that of a father and son (although he "will tuck in the children," the Alien embryos), but rather that of a pet guardian and a highly treasured pet that is part of David's extended self.

*Covenant* continues the use of dead play in the amphitheater David calls a "necropolis." It is designed like a Roman stadium with sculptures of the Engineers, similar to sculptures of Emperors Augustus and Tiberius. Rome was famous for its amphitheaters, the largest of which, Circus Maximus, held 150,000 spectators. Many gladiator fights were between humans and animals, so-called beast hunts, a popular "spectacle of gladiatorial canine combat" (Tuan 1984, 133). More than a million animals were killed in the Colosseum: bears, boars and wolves from the North, tigers and elephants from the East, lions and hyena and crocodiles and ostriches from Africa.<sup>3</sup> The final battle between Daniels and the Alien is a beast hunt in the arena with the film's audience serving as modern spectators to an ancient game.

From the characters' perspective, the beast hunt is a battle for survival, but for an audience the beast hunt invites play<sub>1</sub> and play<sub>3</sub>. In play<sub>1</sub>, a spectator is fully immersed in the action, while in play<sub>3</sub> a spectator might understand the arena in *Covenant* is modeled after a

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<sup>3</sup>Documentary *Colosseum*, episode 3, "The Beastmaster" (director Roel Reiné, aired Jan 26, 2023) about the use of animals in the Colosseum. TV Miniseries 2022.

Roman arena. The point, storywise, is that the Engineers' arena existed first and the Roman arenas were modeled on it. Thus, *Prometheus* and *Covenant* create an Alien cosmology that functions as what Huizinga calls mythopoiesis, "mythical speculations concerning the origin of the world and things, in which creation is imagined as the work of certain gods" (1980, 136).

## Conclusion

Let us finally take a step back and look at the pet and play motifs. The *Alien* franchise films are made by several different directors and not intended to form a continuous story. Yet across the films we find pet and play elements, and we can now ask what they mean.

The Alien was first introduced in *Alien* as a pivot and "other" to the pet cat Jonesy, as a wild animal resisting domestication. In *Aliens*, the good pet/bad pet is transferred from Jonesy/the Alien to the girl Newt/the Alien, thus making a child function as good pet. In *Alien<sup>3</sup>* the pet motif is continued with the Rottweiler/the Alien as good pet/bad pet and introducing the concept of the Alien as family (Ripley and the Alien), which is typical for a human-pet relation. The family connection is brought to the fore in *Alien Resurrection* in which the clones Ripley 8 and the Alien are both bad pets that we side with against the scientists who use torture and murder to produce profit. In *Prometheus* and *Covenant*, the pet motif is elaborated with androids being pets for humans and the Alien as David's new pet. In these two films, play is also thematized as civilization, and fossilized play signifies the fall of civilization.

Philosopher Erica Fudge says, "[p]ets offer philosophers, if not food for their table then a great deal of food for thought" (2014, 8) and quotes anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss when she says, "pets are good to think with" (13). Let us return to the idea of a pet as part of an extended self. In his discussion of totem animals, Lévi-Strauss says we choose totem animals "not because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think'" (2000, Ch. 4). The clan borrows traits from a totem animal: strength from a bear, the freedom to fly from an eagle, and so on. What traits can we borrow from the Alien in the *Aliens vs. Humans* game?

A stable trait is that the Alien will not be domesticated, trained, mastered, caged, contained, or controlled. It will not serve the Corpo-

ration, the military, or the Engineers. Play scholars Huizinga, Caillois, and Sutton-Smith have little to say about pets, but agree violence is part of play. “To dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension – these are the essence of the play spirit” (Huizinga 1980, 57). To the audience, the Alien is more than a monster. It is also a beloved pet to play with, an apex predator whose unmatched aggression we make part of our extended self when we resurrect it for a new game and kill it with joy.

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