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“The Perfect Organism”: A Marxist Reading of Expendable Labor in Alien (1979)

Mahmud Arief Albar ^{*1}

¹Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, 20155, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: mahmudarief@usu.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Ridley Scott’s critically acclaimed 1979 science fiction horror film *Alien* depicts the struggles of the crew of a spaceship named *Nostromo* against a murderous alien monster. The film has been interpreted through critical lenses such as feminism (Kuhn, 1990), psychoanalysis (Telotte, 2001), law (Crofts, 2021), and racism (Sobchak, 2001), but there is still room for other interpretations. This paper proposes a Marxist Cultural Studies reading of the film by conducting a close textual analysis of its narrative structure, character dialogue, production design, and cinematography to explore three core Marxist concepts: alienated labor, class conflict, and commodity fetishism. This is extended into an overview of the film’s contemporaneous socio-economic contexts of 1970s America (USA), such as power structure in the industrial economy, employment anxieties, corporate hegemony, in addition to the lasting effects of (Cold) War in the West. Findings show alienation of the *Nostromo* crew from: 1) their ‘product’ (the murderous alien lifeform they were directed to retrieve); 2) their productive activity (agreement to substandard terms driven only by wage compulsion); 3) their human potential (absence of purpose from labor); 4) other workers (distrust and expendability). The class conflict between the proletariat (the *Nostromo* crew) and the bourgeoisie (the faceless, inhumane corporation represented by the AI ‘Mother’ ship computer and by extension, the alien) structures the film’s narrative of exploitation and betrayal. And lastly, the alien monster can be interpreted as a fetishized commodity desired by the corporation for its potential value, completely outweighing the value of the crew’s lives. By paralleling these findings with the overview of 1970s America’s socio-economic issues in capitalism, such as distrust of authority and corporate hegemony, possible influences on the film’s themes can be seen. In conclusion, this Marxist critique reveals the film’s portrayal of expendable labor in ways that still resonate with modern audiences despite geopolitical space, facilitating a cross-cultural engagement on timeless and global social issues.

Keyword: Marxist Criticism; Alien (1979); Expendable Labor; Science Fiction Horror; Cultural Studies



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1. Introduction

Alien is an American science fiction horror film directed by Ridley Scott, the first movie that would spawn the *Alien* multimedia franchise, becoming a multi-billion-dollar intellectual property for its distributor 20th Century Fox. Released in 1979, the film was a critical and commercial success and in 2002 was selected

for preservation in the United States National Film Registry for being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” by the Library of Congress (Library of Congress, n.d.).

The film’s success can be attributed to the film’s dystopian depiction of an imagined future. *Alien* was produced not long after the culture-defining success of *Star Wars* (1977) and after the *Star Trek* TV series in the 1960s. Like Stanley Kubrick’s landmark sci-fi epic *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), these two franchises set the tone for many sci-fi films to come, portraying their aesthetic settings as optimistic and awe-inspiring with sleek, fantastical, sophisticated technologies that allowed for space and galaxy-spanning fairytale adventures on an epic scale. *Alien*, however, leaned more into the bleak, depressing interpretation of science, technologies, and their inhumane effects that were influenced by post-War America as depicted in sci-fi literature, redefining the sci-fi movie genre as a template for dystopian future, bodily horror, alienation, Othering, and social anxieties. These themes can be seen in Ridley Scott’s subsequent film, *Blade Runner* (1982).

Academic scholarship has assessed the film from a wide range of critical interpretations. In particular, the film’s ‘final/survivor girl’ trope portrayed by one of the leading characters, Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) has attracted many feminist readings. Tasker (1995) examines Ripley as both a vulnerable and empowered female hero. The essays in Kuhn (ed, 1990) place *Alien* at the center of more feminist interpretations; Newton (1990) praises Ripley’s reclaimed femininity as an empowered ‘Company Woman’ by the end of the film. Creed (1993) gives a more psychoanalytical reading that parallels Ripley with the alien creature, examining the depiction of traditional femininity against oppressive sexuality, the monstrous-feminine, and the phallic mother. The film’s depiction of the alien as an unknown force represents fear of the Other, a tendency in many sci-fi American films where the outlandish and inhuman are often portrayed apprehensively. From the perspective of law, Crofts (2021) argues that the film’s portrayal of the evil company is realistic, depicting powerful legal entities with the capabilities to inflict great harm and crime on society without repercussions. Because the movie gives no solution to how society should deal with them, real-world law should take this as a cautionary tale for the regulation of corporations. Sobchak (1997) focuses on the anxieties that arise from both the advancement of technology and corporates, the latter being an instrument of power and the former as its wielder.

The movies in the ‘Alien’ franchise have also been the subject of various cultural studies readings because of their cultural impacts. They reveal how the films function as sites of cultural meaning-making and ideological contestation. Gibson (2001) analyzes all four original Alien films using feminist theory, queer theory, and post-colonial theory, examining how fan interpretations diverge from academic criticism and how the series moves in increasingly transgressive directions. Kuhn (1991) contextualizes science fiction cinema within cultural theory, examining how films like *Alien* rework genre conventions around masculinity, technology, and power structures. Matić & Žakula (2021) examine the franchise’s metanarrative shift from action-horror into creationist themes as seen in *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017), analyzing the anthropocene setting and the dangers of pseudo-archaeological narratives with Biblical settings in science fiction.

Despite these already numerous critical readings, less attention has been paid to the explicitly Marxist, class-based reading of labor exploitation. As most scholarship has focused on gender, reproduction, monstrosity, or technological anxiety, there is still space for a sustained class critique, particularly one with a reflexive approach that takes into account the audience’s subjectivity. Therefore, this paper applies Marxist Cultural Studies criticism to *Alien* through the concepts of alienation, class conflict, and commodity fetishism. These key concepts, developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, are used to explore how the film dramatizes the condition of workers facing inhumane treatment in the pursuit of profit, and ultimately, their expendability.

The aim of this study can be formulated as follows: first, to analyze *Alien* (1979) as a cinematic text that portrays the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation through its representation of blue-collar workers; and second, to situate this analysis within the socio-economic conditions of late 1970s American, while also reflecting on how such interpretations shift when approached from a non-Western perspective. To accomplish

this, the paper employs a Marxist Cultural Studies framework grounded in the three Marxist concepts of alienation, class conflict, and commodity fetishism. These will be presented in the results and discussion subheading. The methodological approach uses a combination of close textual analysis of the film's narrative, dialogue, and visual design with historical contextualization to consider the broader cultural anxieties about labor, corporate power, and technological domination in post-industrial America. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the findings in addition to suggesting the fruitfulness of employing a critical Marxist Cultural Studies lens reflexively and critically in the consumption of art.

2. Method

This study uses a Critical Theory paradigm with Marxist Cultural Studies criticism as the framework. Research adopting the Critical Theory paradigm aims to: 1) Critique and expose hidden power dynamics (Horkheimer, 1972); 2) Empower marginalized voices (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000); 3) Promote emancipation and social transformation (Habermas, 1984; Marcuse, 1964); 4) Bridge theory and practice (Marx, 1849/1978), and; 5) Raise critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). In short, the choice of CT is to see how *Alien* (1979) as a cultural product and a work of fiction portrays social power relations that can raise critical consciousness and contribute to broader discourses and projects of emancipation and social transformation. The method of analysis—Marxist cultural studies criticism on media, literary work, and film—is adapted from Becker (1984), Dobie (2024), Kashindi (2018), and Wayne (2019).

By operating under the Critical Theory paradigm and adopting the Marxist Cultural Studies criticism framework, this methodology allows for a critical reading of fiction to identify dominating power and ideological structures that can reveal social injustices. In this context, the film is considered beyond mere entertainment, but an ideological artifact that reproduces and/or challenges the character, society, and world being depicted. This is in line with Marxist thinkers' ideas on culture: Jameson (1981) argues that cultural narratives are fundamentally symbolic social actions that contain the political consciousness of a period, while Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (1971), which examines power relation in economy as encoded in the film. This framework is chosen to analyze the dialectical relationship between the film as a cultural product with society by narrowing the scope of this research to the Marxist concepts of alienation, class conflict, and commodity fetishism as outlined in the abstract.

In Marxist Cultural Studies criticism, the three concepts of alienated labor, class conflict, and commodity fetishism are among the core ideas developed throughout Marx and Engels' influential works (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *Capital, Volume 1*). Their representations in the film show how labor is depicted as expendable in a society that values products over human lives. To examine these concepts, this paper uses a combination of textual and contextual methodological analysis. The textual analysis, as seen in film studies by Bordwell and Thompson (2017), focuses on *Alien* as the primary data/text to identify how ideology is communicated and encoded through its cinematic elements. Following the suggestion by Graeme Turner (2006) in the study of film as cultural practice, the analysis then proceeds to the contextual analysis that views *Alien* in dialogue with the socio-historical conditions of 1970s America. This combination ensures that the internal meaning of the text is parallel with the discursive function of films within the wider cultural discourses on labor, corporate hegemony, and post-industrial social anxiety. In short, this methodology bridges the close textual reading of the film with the exploration of socioeconomic discourse that the film shaped and was shaped by.

The textual analysis is implemented through a close reading of the elements that formed the movie to identify the previously mentioned three Marxist concepts. The characters, plot and setting are analyzed first, through the script and dialogues to examine the representation of class, power dynamics, and anxiety of the characters that represent proletariat conditions. The visuals and cinematography of the film, such as the lighting and camera angles, are interpreted in how they build the atmosphere of oppressiveness and helplessness. The production design is also analyzed as representations of poor working conditions and industrial labor anxiety. The alien's biomechanic design also blurs the line between organic and machine; a metaphor of the inhumanity and mercilessness of capitalist corporate machinations.

The secondary data comprised this research's historical contextualization section. Paratexts analysis, such as promotional arts and trailers, Ridley Scott's directorial interview and commentaries, are minimized to demonstrate the efficacy of applying a (Marxist) Cultural Studies line of inquiry for interpreting cultural products and meaning-making, underlining the reflexive approach of this paper. The secondary data consist of: 1) existing academic criticism on *Alien* from the perspective of feminism, psychoanalysis, and others, for comparison with this paper's proposed Marxist argumentation; 2) socio-economic historical texts that show 1970s America's issues on labor anxiety, corporate hegemony, and post-War anxiety. The archival/journalistic supplement materials (magazines, newspapers, labor reports) are intended to capture how these issues were publicly discussed at the time and enrich the core analysis. They are, therefore, supplementary and do not entail an additional analytical method such as discourse analysis to examine. The selection of materials are therefore purposeful, not exhaustive; they are chosen to illuminate discourses that resonate with the film's representation of labor and corporate hegemony, not to provide a total history of the 1970s. This ensures that they maintain a dialogic relationship between the text and context, because these materials are always interpreted in relation to the film's narrative, imagery, and production design.

This Marxist framework is extended through a reflexive approach that considers audience subjectivity, using my own positionality as an outsider audience whose generation and geopolitical background are different than the Western/American society where the film was released to show that diverse audience backgrounds hold the potential to enrich interpretations rather than undermine them. My first understanding of *Alien* was as a straightforward monster horror film; it was many years later that I recognized its ideological critique through the lens of Cultural Studies. Furthermore, the film's themes and commentaries still resonate with present-day socio-politico-economic issues, showing its relevance that crosses cultural boundaries. This demonstrates the utility of critical theories: providing a framework that allows an outsider to comprehend imported cultural products while integrating consciously their own subjective position.

3.1.3 Results and Discussion

3.1. Overview of intrinsic elements in *Alien*: characters, plot, setting

3.1.1. Characters

1) The Labor (Proletariat)

The Nostromo crew is consistently portrayed as representation of the working class who faces occupational risks, exhaustion, and exploitation while executing the corporate directive. Dallas, Ripley, Parker, Brett, Lambert, and Kane were designed to look like "truckers in space" (Special Features Archive, 2025), not idealistic scientists or pioneers of space exploration. They are contract laborers employed to operate an interplanetary freighter. Their identities are revealed through conversations that frequently focus on compensation, bonuses, and employment contracts, emphasizing their relationship to work as grounded in economic necessity rather than moral calling.



Picture 1. The Nostromo crew. Common people and workers.

Internal class tensions also shape interactions among the crew: Parker and Brett feel undervalued for their limited rights and privilege, complaining that the higher-ranked officers “never come down here” where “the works is,” noting bitterly that their “half share” pay and the feeling that “our time is their time” (*Alien*, 1979, 00:10:46). Ripley tries to enforce company rules to maintain work discipline, even though she is also in an equally powerless subordinate position; when Dallas and Lambert ordered her to allow them to board the ship while carrying the infected Kane, she refused, arguing that the officers “know the quarantine procedure” (*Alien*, 1979, 00:35:42). Ironically, her authority was overruled by Ash, a supposedly lower-ranked science officer. It was only revealed later that Ash held the highest position, being the extension and enforcer of the corporate’s will and rules. Dallas as the captain only cares for managing the ship rather than leading it. When he was challenged by Ripley for bringing the infected Kane onboard, he deflects responsibility, claiming that he just “runs the ship” and that “standard procedure is to do what the Hell [the company] tell you to do” before ultimately confessing “I don’t trust anybody” (*Alien*, 1979, 00:50:49).

The characterization of the crew highlights their alienation as laborers: they are forced to obey contracts, lack both control and knowledge of their mission, distrustful of each other, and ultimately were considered replaceable. This representation demonstrates how science fiction narratives remain rooted in social realities of labor, exploitation, and economic insecurity.

2) *The Corporate (Bourgeoisie)*

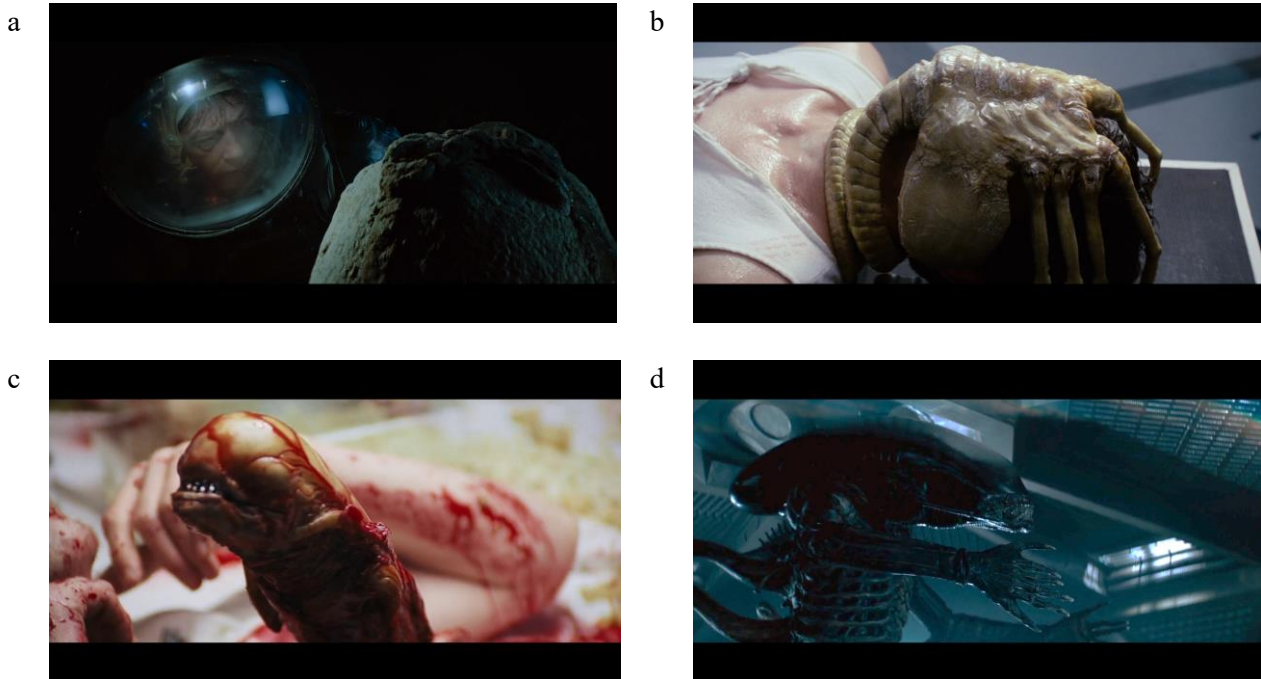
The corporation employing the Nostromo crew never appears as an individual character. It operates as a faceless and abstract entity, embodied through the ship’s central computer named ‘Mother’, whose communication with is only authorized for the highest-ranked staff (Dallas as the captain, then Ripley) confined in the small, ‘Mother’ computer room. Along with Mother, the science officer character Ash is also a corporate agent. Mother is more than a communication computer whose function is to relay directives from the corporation; it symbolically represents the cold, bureaucratic system with no regard for human life. Ash, in contrast, is the concrete manifestation of corporate will as he conceals the true mission from the crew, protects the alien as a commodity, and even betrays his colleagues to ensure the success of the “special order”.

From a psychoanalysis perspective, the film also shows a cycle of death and rebirth: Mother’s cramped, confined, but mechanical computer room is symbolic of a womb which gives birth to Ash, a synthetic robot, and by extension, the alien monster who proceeded to impregnate Kane, who then ‘gives birth’ to the monster. This cycle of life becomes a cycle of death because of it is corrupted by an inhumane system that devalues life, as machines (Mother and Ash) cannot give way to life. This theme would be revisited and explored in the franchise’s later films (*Prometheus*, 2012, and *Alien: Covenant*, 2017), signifying the concept of ‘evil begets evil’.

This characterization underscores how the bourgeoisie operates through technological and bureaucratic structures to control the proletariat by enforcing compliance by proxy (Mother), dispense and dispose of labor (Ash), and uphold the logic of capital accumulation. By presenting the corporation as an invisible actor, the film highlights the faceless nature of modern capitalism: a system that continues to function without representation by a single human figure. This characterization reinforces the critique of corporate hegemony, which proves to be oppressive and enveloping on individual human rights.

3) *The Alien Monster as Corporate Extension*

The alien monster occupies the unique position of combining the two worlds of proletariat (the human Nostromo crew) and bourgeoisie (the corporate represented by the ‘Mother’ computer). H.R. Giger, the creature designer, wanted the alien to embody biomechanical aesthetic; it is clearly a living creature but it cannot be tamed like an animal and is far superior in strength and size. The crew’s analysis of the creature highlights its terrifying invulnerability, noting its deadly acidic blood as a “defense mechanism” and its ability to regenerate its body with polarized silicone, making it nearly impossible to kill (*Alien*, 1979, 00:44:14). This further represents the helpless and hopeless situation of the Nostromo’s crew, being caught against an oppressive authority (the corporate) and the brutal, unstoppable physical strength of the monster.



Picture 2, a-d. The life cycle of the alien (from a - d): egg, impregnation of host, birth by bursting from the host body and maturity. The phallic features of its body suggest violence and predatory. Note the change in camera angle: in its egg, facehugger, and newborn form, the camera is high angle with the humans looking down on the egg indicating its vulnerability. But from the point of its full-grown size reveal, the camera sticks to low angle to show the alien being more powerful and imposing than the humans.

The alien's mechanistic logic is driven purely by instinct to devour and propagate, by impregnating the human host and killing them in the birth process. Its existence only made possible through assault, rape, death, and forced reproduction, symbolizing capitalism's lust and greed to consume human lives for its continued existence. It is desired by the corporation not because its value for science, but for its exploitability. Ripley surmised, "They must have wanted the alien for the weapons division" (*Alien*, 1979, 01:24:16). Therefore, the alien functions as a 'product' for capital, while the human crews' lives exist only for labor. This characterization emphasizes the close relationship between the bourgeoisie's power and alien's violence: both operates on the logic of exploitation, propagation, and disregard for human lives. The alien becomes an embodiment of the extreme aspects of capitalism that devour humans for perpetuation of their system.

3.1.2. Plot

The structure of *Alien* intrinsically portrays the class conflict that emphasize capitalist exploitation. The narrative begins with the ship *Nostromo*'s journey home to Earth, but its crew of "space truckers" was awakened prematurely as the result of Mother's intervention under corporate instructions. From this point, the developing central conflict extends beyond a struggle against the alien creature; it becomes a deeper symbolic confrontation between the survival of laborers with the corporation's singular pursuit of commodifiable asset. The mission orders, requiring the crew to investigate a mysterious signal despite their inexperience, poor means for self-defense, inadequate tools and equipment for such mission reflect the subordination of workers by the power of capital.

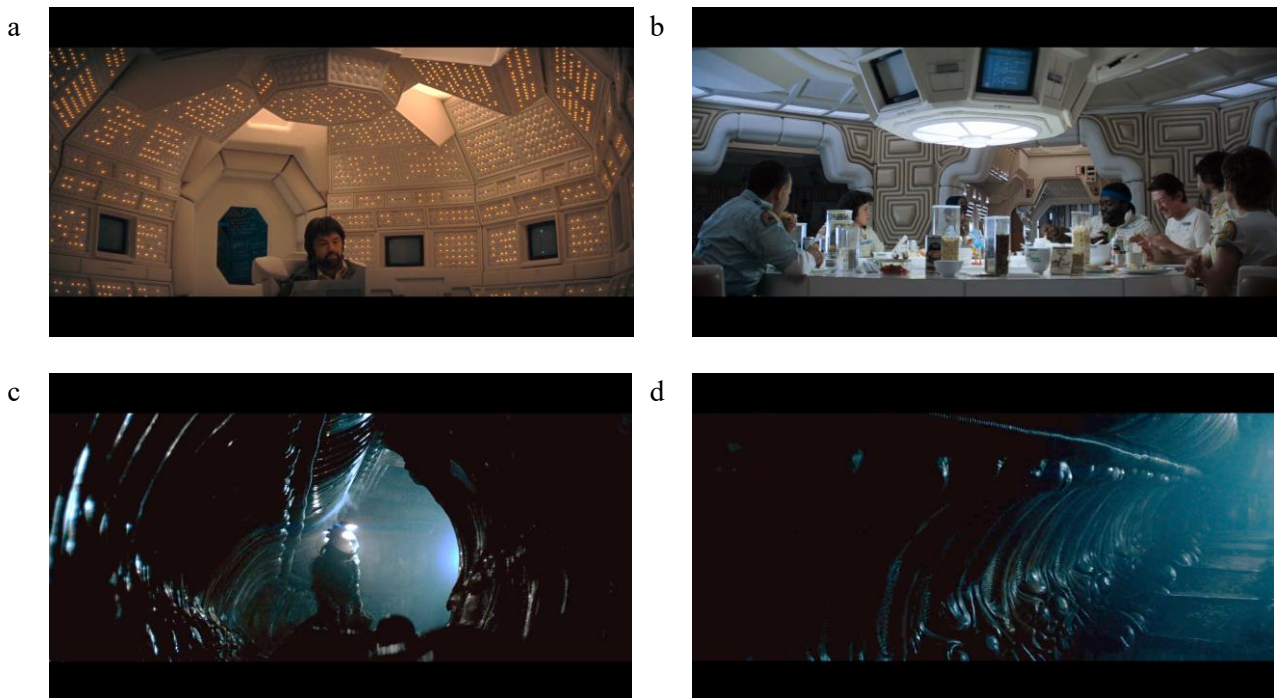
Tension escalates as the alien monster begins killing the crew, and it was revealed that the crew's safety is subordinated to the "special order" that prioritizes the creature's retrieval for the company's purpose. The betrayal by Ash, who is revealed to be both an android and a corporate agent, marks a turning point that exposes the true view of capitalism: labors are expendable. The climax, with the *Nostromo* destroyed in self-destruction and Ripley remaining as the sole survivor, underscores the drastic measures that labor might be forced to take for survival, and their isolation in confronting a system larger than themselves. Ripley's victory is not merely an individual survival but a symbolic resistance against the logic of capitalism that consumes its own workforce.

To summarize, the plot structure of *Alien* progresses from the depiction of routine proletarian labor, to the revelation of bourgeois exploitation, and culminates in a destructive final confrontation between class relations. This sci-fi horror narrative functions as political allegory: the life-and-death struggle between the crew and alien is not simply a human-versus-monster battle, but a representation of class struggle within capitalist society.

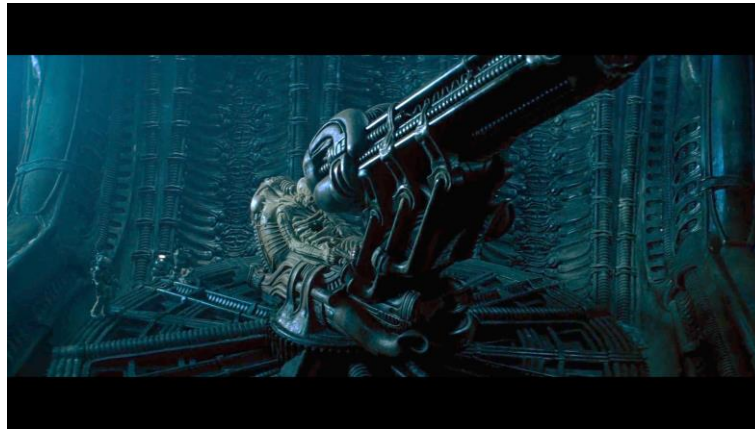
3.1.3. Setting

One of the strongest aspects of *Alien* (1979) is its setting design, which sharply contrasts with earlier science fiction films such as *Star Wars* (1977), *Star Trek* (1966–1969), or *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). These films generally present an outer space as clean, bright, and fascinating, with sleek designs of spaceships and, optimistic futurism aesthetic, and sterile interiors that reflect the vision of advanced human technology. In contrast, *Alien*, constructs a dystopian atmosphere: the *Nostromo* is depicted as grim, cramped, and dilapidated. The interior corridors are dark, filled with pipes, steam, and the noise of industrial machinery. Rather than an exploratory vessel, the *Nostromo* resembles a gothic castle, a floating factory, or an interstellar tanker transporting commodities, not space battles or interstellar hubs. This setting positions the crew as “space truckers/laborers” forced to work in harsh, inhumane conditions.

The design of the *Nostromo* contrasts the derelict alien ship design where the alien eggs were discovered. While the *Nostromo* is mechanical, symmetrical, and industrial, the alien ship appears organic: its rooms are expansive, curving, and its walls seem composed of bones. The atmosphere resembles a cavern or a giant womb, at once awe-inspiring but also lethal. The dead body of the alien “space jockey”, discovered in the alien ship, is described as “fossilized” and “grown out of the chair” (*Alien*, 1979, 00:29:10), symbolizing workers being absorbed into their occupation like an instrument of production, and their eventual demise within an exploitative system that uses lives for hazardous labor.



Pictures 3, a-d. Comparison of the space/interior for the three groups (corporation, workers, and the alien). The 'Mother' AI room (top left) is cold and mechanical; the workers' common room (top right) has padded walling and is more suitable for organic living, but both are symmetrical and industrial, while the alien ship's design is biological, curved, skeletal/seemingly made up of bones (bottom). All the environments are ultimately hazardous and lethal to humans.



Picture 4. The dead, giant 'space jockey' alien. Described as "fossilized" and "grown out of the chair", foreshadowing of death on the Nostromo crew, attachment to work, and death caused by the work environment.

The two settings share a critical commonality: both are deadly to humans. The Nostromo, with its bleak industrial spaces, signals the dehumanization of laborers under capitalism. The alien ship, with its organic, body-like design, represents exploitation reaching an extreme where workers merge with their own tools of production. Whereas such setting—a pilot's seat—is frequently depicted in other sci-fi films as a space of command, mastery, and power, and the outer space as romantically depicted as grounds for wonder-filled exploration or glorious space battles, in *Alien* it becomes a space of oppression and death. Accordingly, the setting functions not merely as a backdrop, but as an ideological device that articulates a critique on capitalism and industrialization.

The intrinsic analysis of *Alien* through the character, plot, and setting confirms that the film is not a mere sci-fi horror story, but a narrative structured around the logic of labor and exploitation. The characters are divided into the proletariat (the Nostromo crew) and bourgeoisie (Mother, Ash, the alien monster), and the plot depicts the escalating class conflicts with moments of betrayal and death, and the setting presents both industrial and organic spaces that are equally lethal. With this foundation, the application of a Marxist framework becomes evident: the film demonstrates how capitalism permeates its narrative and visual structures.

3.2. Marxist concepts analysis

3.2.1. Alienated labor

1) Alienation from product

According to Marx, one form of alienation experienced by laborers under capitalism is alienation from the product: the results of a worker's labor no longer belong to or hold meaning for the worker, but are entirely controlled by capital. As he explains in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the product of labor: "becomes something alien to the worker, a power standing outside himself, opposing and hostile to him" (Marx, 1844/1964). Labor products, which should represent human creativity and existence, instead become foreign, even dangerous, to the worker.

In the context of *Alien*, the "product" in question is not an ordinary material object, but the alien creature that becomes the objective of the Nostromo crew's mission. The dialogue between Dallas, Kane, and the rest of the crew demonstrates that the decision to pursue the signal and retrieve the creature does not originate from the crew's own will, but from the AI computer Mother, programmed by the corporation. Parker and Brett complained that "the bonus situation has never been on an equitable level", highlighting their awareness of their own exploitation, while Dallas dismisses the suggestion by giving a vague reply: "You get what you're contracted for", shutting down any negotiation, reinforcing class status, and corporate control (*Alien*, 1979, 00:07:28). In other words, the workers have no control over the outcome of their labor; they are compelled to "produce" something—the search and retrieval of the alien lifeform—that ended up threatens to destroy them.

This alienation becomes particularly evident as the product of labor (the alien) is not only foreign but lethal. The crew gains no benefit from the creature; on the contrary, its existence endangers their lives, showing that the entire labor process is dictated solely by capitalist logic: corporate profit. Consequently, the film portrays an extreme form of alienation from the product, in which the results of labor are not only removed from worker control, but become instruments of direct suffering and destruction.

2) *Alienation from productive activity*

According to Marx in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, another form of alienation is alienation from productive activity—that is, when the labor process is no longer carried out as a free expression of human potential, but solely as an external obligation for survival. Labor becomes something “forced, not fulfilling a need, but merely a means for external needs outside itself” (Marx, 1844/1964).

Dialogue between Dallas, Parker, and Ash underscores this condition. Parker immediately rejects the duty on principle, insisting, “It’s not in my contract,” and revealing his primary motivation is money by asking to “go over the bonus situation”. He insists that he will only participate if there is additional compensation (“some money”), as he is not interested in any intrinsic value or meaning in the work itself. Ash then weaponizes the crew’s contract to enforce compliance, under the threat of “penalty of total forfeiture of shares... No money,” threatening the crew to lose their entire share of profits (Alien, 1979, 00:12:05). Here, the labor process is no longer a voluntary choice, but dictated by contractual pressure and wage compulsion.

The *Nostromo* crew’s labor activity is therefore thoroughly alienated: they do not work for satisfaction or freedom, but under the looming threat of economic punishment. A process that should serve as a means of self-actualization instead becomes a burden, emphasizing the worker’s total dependence on the capitalist system.

3) *Alienation from human potential*

According to Marx in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, alienation from human potential occurs when labor no longer allows individuals to develop their abilities, freedom, and creativity as social beings. Instead of serving as a means of self-actualization, labor under capitalism reduces humans to mere instruments of production, stripping them of their essential humanity (*Gattungswesen*).

A dialogue between Parker, Brett, and Ripley highlights this condition. Parker and Brett repeatedly emphasize their shares or wage portions, showing that their labor is meaningless beyond financial compensation. The breaching of the topic has become rote because both already know the pointlessness in asking, therefore becoming a means to pester and harass the higher-ranked officers.

BRETT: Look, I'm not doing any more work until we get this straightened out.

RIPLEY: Brett, you're guaranteed by law to get a share.

PARKER: *pretends not to hear* What?

RIPLEY: *annoyed* Why don't you just fuck off? (Alien, 1979, 00:22:12)

The irritated Ripley assures them that they both will get their share. Here it becomes evident that the crew’s work carries no intrinsic or personal meaning. The uncertainty over wage distribution further strips them of control and purpose, even generating tension among the workers themselves.

In this way, *Alien* demonstrates how the capitalist labor system not only confines the worker’s body but also robs them of their human potential for creativity and freedom. The *Nostromo* crew are trapped in contracts that estrange them from their very humanity, reducing their existence to that of replaceable laborers.

4) *Alienation from other workers*

Marx identifies another form of alienation as alienation from other workers, in which the capitalist system of production not only severs the worker’s relationship with the product and the labor process, but also corrodes

the social relations between individuals. In such conditions, workers, no longer see one another as partners, but as competitors or even threats (Marx, 1844/1964).

In *Alien*, this dynamic is clearly seen through select moments. First, the dialog between Ripley and Dallas in discussing Ash—who was imposed by the company as “science officer”—is distrusted by the crew because his given authority in contractual hierarchy. Dallas states, “I don’t trust anybody,” (*Alien*, 1979, 00:50:30), showing the loss of worker solidarity. Second, the reveal that Ash was a synthetic android intensifies the corporate’s betrayal of the crew’s trust; slipping a non-human agent to protect their capital interests (the alien as commodity), not the crew’s safety. Third, the debate between Ripley, Lambert, and Parker about using the escape shuttle shows the crew’s internal conflicts. Instead of solidarity, the competition for survival is suggested when Lambert wanted to draw straws to decide who would get the shuttle, which cannot accommodate three personnel (*Alien*, 1979, 01:16:38). Through these scenes, *Alien* show that capitalism can threaten to alienate workers from each other and ruin social bonds by reducing them into survival state, making them suspect, betray and compete against each other.

3.2.2. Class conflict

According to Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), the history of society is essentially the history of class struggle, in which the proletariat is positioned as laborers who their labor power for wages, while the bourgeoisie controls the means of production.

In *Alien*, the Nostromo crew is portrayed as futuristic proletariat or “space truckers” whose rugged lives are shaped by manual labor and wage contracts. This is reflected in the ship’s aesthetics: the interior of the Nostromo is filled with pipes, noisy engine rooms, and simple sleeping quarters; it resembles more of a floating factory than a sophisticated spacecraft, and the crew is depicted as working-class laborers, not scientists or military elites. The film’s design production asserts that even in outer space, labor conditions still mirror the proletariat’s dependence on capital.

Within the Marxist framework, the bourgeoisie constitutes the class that owns the means of production and wields capital to exploit the labor of the proletariat for the sake of profit accumulation (*The Communist Manifesto*, 1848). They do not engage directly in labor but determines the rules and goals of production and distribution, while the fate of the workers remains entirely under their control.

In *Alien*, this bourgeoisie power manifests as a faceless corporation represented only through technology: the Nostromo’s AI computer ‘Mother’, and the synthetic android Ash. Mother’s ‘physical’ body is depicted through her small, control room, which can only be accessed by the highest-ranked officer, with countless blinking lights covering the walls of her small and symbolizing the enveloping nature of machine occupying this tiny space, yet also being the most important section of the ship where the powerful corporation was able to impose their will through Mother. Her room resembling a womb, which gives life to another inhumane machine, Ash. This visualization asserts the distance and alienation between the power of the bourgeoisie on the proletariat’s life.

The instructions that Ripley eventually discovered in the Mother room reinforce this logic:

“Priority One: Insure Return of Organism For Analysis. All Other Considerations Secondary. Crew Expendable.” (*Alien*, 1979, 01:20:05)

The phrase “Crew Expendable” is the core of the bourgeoisie’s exploitation. The corporation does not regard the crew as valuable human lives, only disposable tools for profit. The contrast between the spaces in the ship where the crew works and Mother’s sterile room symbolizes how capitalist decisions are made far removed from the reality of the working class, yet also determine their survival.

Within the framework of Marxist Cultural Studies, the alien monster itself may be read as a metaphorical embodiment of capitalism’s insatiable greed. The alien does not only kill, but also subjugates the human body violently; they propagate by forcibly impregnate their host, symbolizing rape and defilement, and their birth means the death of the host. This process illustrates how capitalism exploits labor by also seizing their body

and life to continually reproduce surplus value. The biomechanical design of the mature alien—entirely-organic, but resembling machine through its retractable internal mouth shows its affinity with the cold, efficient, and merciless machinery of modern capitalism. On one level, the alien monster appears as a beast driven only by instinct; on another, its biomechanical design signifies the mechanical and unstoppable industrial production logic. Therefore, the alien is not merely a biological threat but also a symbol of an economic system that consumes and alienates workers perpetually. Its presence in the film intensifies class conflict, showing that the crew's enemy is not only this extraterrestrial creature, but the capitalist logic in lethal form.

H.R. Giger's design of the alien further emphasizes this horror of capitalism. The alien's biomechanical design, with erotic but grotesque aesthetics—a pharyngeal jaw (a secondary set of jaws located in its throat that can extend out of its mouth to grab and pull prey inward), and the phallic shape of the head symbolically represents the nature of capitalism that penetrates the deepest recess of society. Its design is therefore not only aesthetically horrifying, but also a penetrating criticism of industrial dehumanization.

3.2.3. *Commodity fetishism*

1) *The monster as the fetishised commodity*

Within the Marxist framework, commodity fetishism refers to capitalism's tendency to obscure social relations between people by concentrating value in the commodity itself. As Karl Marx explains in *Das Kapital*, fetishism arises when products of human labor are treated as though they possess an "intrinsic value" independent of the social relations and labor that produced them. In this way, commodities acquire a mystical power that conceals the exploitation underlying their production.

In *Alien* (1979), the creature itself became the most extreme manifestation of commodity fetishism. For the corporation that orders its retrieval, the alien is not perceived as a biological threat, but as a "product" to be captured and analyzed with profitable potential for economic or military purposes. The lives of the crew are meaningless; only the capital potential of the creature matters. This is reinforced in the revelation of Ash's view on the alien lifeform, representing the corporate's view of its value:

RIPLEY: What was your special order?

ASH: You read it. I thought it was clear. ...Bring back life form, priority one. **All other priorities rescinded.**

PARKER: The damn company! What about our lives, you son of a bitch?!

ASH: I repeat, all other priorities are rescinded.

RIPLEY: How do we kill it, Ash?...

ASH: You can't. ...You still don't understand what you're dealing with, do you? **The perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility.**

LAMBERT: You admire it.

ASH: **I admire its purity. A survivor, unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality.** (*Alien*, 1979, 01:25:17)

The dialog illustrates how fetishism works; the corporate admires the alien not because of its biological traits but as a "perfect organism" that is devoid of morality, conscience, and humanity. In other words, it is greatly sought after by the corporate for the exact reason *because* it is *not* human. This admiration mirrors the logic of capitalism that idealizes commodity as autonomous entities despite their existence requiring the sacrifice of and life of human labor. Parker's frustration at this absurd logic echoes the audience's, "The damn company! What about our lives?" (*Alien*, 1979, 01:25:12), but to Ash/the corporation, the crew's lives are not valued and can be easily sacrificed for the continuity of the commodity. Through this representation, *Alien*

delivers a sharp critique of how capitalism transforms social relations into a total subordination under the power of the commodity.

2) *The crew as the “perfect organism”: expendable labor*

Further analysis and definition of the “perfect organism” that Ash admires also applies to the Nostromo crew; it is their very disposability and expendability that make them perfect for the corporate’s needs. Their replaceability makes them ideal for a profit-oriented system, making the system a perpetual machine that has no fear of repercussions nor challenge because it is the one making the rules. In this sense, both the alien and the crew are situated within the same logic of value: mere instruments of capital accumulation.

Furthermore, the film reveals how technology (Mother, Ash, and Nostromo itself) functions, nor was it designed, to support or improve human lives, because they are merely extensions of the corporate’s will. Mother as the central control computer does not protect the crew, but enforces the directive of “crew expendable”. Ash, the android, operates entirely to protect the commodity rather than his human colleagues. Even the design of the Nostromo reinforces the indifference of the system: there is only one escape shuttle which capacity is insufficient for the entire crew, and it is ironically cannot be used in emergency because of the required procedures and preparations for its launch, such as retrieving coolant tanks from another section of the ship. This gross inadequacy even indirectly caused the death of two crews—Parker and Lambert—who were ambushed by the monster alien, signifying the lack of care by capitalism for even emergency facilities. These details emphasize that technology in the film is not neutral, but is structurally organized to uphold the logic of its master (capitalism), securing the preservation of the commodity over the survival of the workers.

3) *Examining the visual design of the Nostromo*

The visual aesthetics in *Alien* further reinforce its critique of commodity fetishism. The production design of the Nostromo resembles a giant factory or an industrial tanker, in contrast to the elegant, futuristic imagery often portrayed in science fiction. Its interior is dark and filled with pipes, steam and noisy machinery; asserting the film’s theme that space exploration is not about knowledge or human progress, but an extension of industrial capitalism mission for new resources to plunder and exploit. The crew’s workspace reveals the marginalized material conditions of the workers: they do not have proper uniform, only ranks; inadequate quality of sustenance (Parker: “I haven’t finished my coffee, it’s the only thing good on this ship” [00:07:51]), which they *still* need to pay, as indicated by Dallas, “One more meal before bedtime. I’m buying” (*Alien*, 1979, 00:54:30); easily broken equipments, as indicated by the crew stranded on a planet because of a bad landing; complete absence of weaponry or means of self defense, as they had to makeshift their own radar and flamethrower to protect against the alien; and the insufficient shuttle.

In summary, conducting a close textual analysis of *Alien* (1979), the three core concepts from Marxist Cultural Studies can be clearly identified: alienated labor, class conflict, and commodity fetishism. The film is therefore not a mere sci-fi horror film, but also an allegory that exposes labor relations, exploitation, and dehumanization under capitalism. This analysis can be further strengthened by analyzing the socio-economic conditions of the United States in the 1970s that might have inspired or influenced the film’s creation.

3.2.4. *Brief historical contextualizations*

1) *Alien in the shadow of 1970s America*

The class conflict depicted in *Alien* can be understood by looking at the bleak economic landscape of 1970s America. This period saw sharp stagflation (stagnation and inflation) coupled with high unemployment (Judt, 2005). This significantly eroded workers’ real wages and created widespread anxiety about their grim future. However, corporate power grew stronger as driven by global competitive pressures and the early ideological shift toward neoliberalism that emphasizes deregulation and market logic (Harvey, 2005). This power is reflected in the corporate decision in *Alien* to sacrifice the Nostromo crew for potential profit, paralleling real-world business practices that prioritizes shareholders over worker welfare.

This period also saw the significant decline of labor unions. Lichtenstein (2002) notes that unions faced intense political and economic pressure, weakening their ability to protect members' rights. This problem is further exacerbated by the decline in labor protections, making workers' positions increasingly vulnerable and expendable; a condition that can be seen in both the real world and within the film's narrative.

2) *Post-Vietnam and Watergate anxiety and distrust*

Beyond these economic factors, the resonance of class conflict in *Alien* is reinforced by the eroding trust in government and institutions during the 1970s. The Vietnam War, widely regarded as a futile and unethical intervention, caused a trauma that could still be felt even today. The Watergate scandal that led to President Nixon's resignation in 1974 produced a deep legitimacy crisis (Schudson, 1992). American society became increasingly cynical toward official narratives and suspicious of centralized power.

This distrust is clearly reflected in the film's dynamics: the corporation, represented by "Mother" and the android Ash, functions as an authoritarian entity with hidden motives that they concealed from the *Nostromo* crew. Ash's betrayal as an android serving corporate interests at the expense of human life can be seen as a metaphor for institutional betrayal by entities that should have been trustworthy. As Ryan and Kellner (1988) analyze, science fiction films of this era frequently explore fears of uncontrolled technology and bureaucracy, extensions of corrupt authority. Thus, the tension and paranoia aboard the *Nostromo* reflect not only fear of an alien monster but also a personification of collective anxiety toward authorities that are no longer aligned with the common people.

3) *Neoliberal roots and corporate domination in Reagan era*

The source of corporate power and weakening of labor depicted in *Alien* can be found in the political rise of neoliberal ideology that dominated the 1980s. The film's release in 1979 was a critical juncture where the American society became anxious about a future governed by economic logic that increasingly marginalized human values. Neoliberal thought, popularized by economists such as Milton Friedman (1962) and Friedrich Hayek, emphasized deregulation, privatization, and the belief that free-market forces were the best mechanism for allocating resources. Policies fully implemented during the Reagan administration systematically reinforced corporate hegemony by limiting the government's role as a protector of public interests (Harvey, 2005).

Corporations in *Alien* operate under the same pure market logic; they are transnational entities not bound by national loyalty or morality and views the crew and even the alien itself merely as assets to be managed for profit maximization. As Davis (1986) argues, this period marked the beginning of a "top-down revolution" that concentrated wealth and power. Thus, *Alien* not only critiques the conditions of its own era but also envisions presciently the logical consequences of a society in which commodity value truly overrides the value of human life.

3.2.5. *Outsider Perspective and Cross-Cultural Reflection*

1) *Personal reflexivity reflection: becoming a critical audience*

My initial reading of *Alien* in the 1980s was little more than an appreciation of a frightening sci-fi horror narrative, in which tension is built through the threat of the deadly alien monster. At that point, I did not see the film's deeper socio-political critique. It was much later, after reapproaching the film through a cultural theory framework, that I began to watch the film with a more critical lens. By observing the characters, script, setting, and themes, I was able to assess the film's ideological layers that I had previously overlooked. By selecting a Cultural Studies theories in my consumption of art and cultural products, I was able to gain even deeper understanding, seeing how the film functions as a sharp allegory of economic power structures.

What is even more striking is the finding that the relevance of this critique transcends both time and geography. Themes such as labor exploitation, faceless corporate hegemony, and human alienation from work remain pertinent issues that are recognizable across various contemporary societies, including beyond the Western world. Ultimately, this experience confirms the value of critical theories: the frameworks provided not only serve as keys to unlock the complex meanings of imported cultural products, but also allows readers from different backgrounds to consciously integrate their own subjective positions into the interpretive process, resulting in richer, more contextualized understandings.

2) Drawing parallels with labor exploitation issues in Indonesia and Southeast Asia

The issues identified in *Alien* by using Marxist critique reveal a vivid and important resonance with contemporary Indonesia and Southeast Asia. The transnational corporate logic that prioritizes commodity value over human life is reflected in extractive corporate practices—such as those in palm oil plantations and mining industries—where worker safety and welfare are often neglected to maximize natural resource exploitation (Li, 2011). Furthermore, the vulnerability experienced by the *Nostromo* crew closely parallels the precarious conditions of industrial labor in the region. Research on workers in the garment and electronics sectors, for example, reveals low wages, long working hours, and hazardous conditions, demonstrating how easily labor can be replaced and treated as a cost to minimize rather than as human beings (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013; Kelly, 2002).

The widespread use of outsourcing and short-term contract systems in Indonesia has created a class of workers in a permanent state of uncertainty, closely resembling the helplessness of the contract-bound *Nostromo* crew (Tjandraningsih, 2011). In this context, the “alien” threatening life is not a literal extraterrestrial being, but the logic of global capitalism itself, which, like the corporation in the film, regards workers as expendable components within its complex supply chains.

These parallels make it clear that *Alien*’s criticism on power can be understood across geography or era. The film’s portrayal of exploitative capitalist relations can be seen in the characteristics of global capitalist system. Its critique of corporate hegemony and labor alienation constitutes a “universal language” that can be understood by audiences from Jakarta to Manila, who recognize reflections of job insecurity and power imbalances in their own lives (Dirlik, 1994).

Alien’s resonance to non-Western audiences demonstrates that capitalism, as a global system, produces experiences of alienation and fear that are likewise global. The film is not merely a mirror of 1970s American anxieties but a powerful allegory of worker conditions within a worldwide economic-political system. Its critique of capitalistic logic that sacrifices human life for capital accumulation is still relevant, because its operation continues today in forms that may have become more complex and ruthless.

4. Conclusion

Analyzing *Alien* (1979) through the lens of Marxist Cultural Studies shows that the film is more than a sci-fi horror story; it is a sharp allegory of worker exploitation. The three core Marxist concepts of alienated labor, class conflict, and commodity fetishism illustrate the condition of the *Nostromo* crew who are forced to work under unjust terms, positioned as expendable labor, and regarded as less of value to the dangerous commodity (the alien) they retrieved. The faceless corporation, embodied by Mother and As, enforces capitalist logic with inhumane determination: “crew expendable”. This coldness is reinforced through the industrial design of the *Nostromo* and the biomechanical alien: mechanical, ruthless, and devoid of empathy.

Placed within the socio-economic contexts of 1970s America—stagflation era, decline of labor union, and the rise of corporate hegemony—the film reflects the collective anxiety towards the future driven by neoliberal logic. However, its relevance extends beyond this context; cross-cultural audiences, including those in Southeast Asia, can still recognize the same critique in contemporary labor issues.

This paper suggests the use of *Alien* in opening pedagogical possibilities. By adapting Paulo Freire's framework of Critical Pedagogy, the film can serve as a medium to foster critical consciousness among students and viewers, revealing how hidden power relations operate within popular culture. In this way, *Alien* functions not only as entertainment but also as a tool for critical reflection on global capitalism, and as educational material that reinforces the role of learning as a means of social emancipation.

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