In *Thinking on Screen*, Thomas Wartenberg formulates two variants of an *imposition objection* to the legitimacy of philosophical interpretations of films. The legitimacy question concerns whether the interpretation *belongs to the film* in a way that supports a claim that films are occasionally capable of *doing* philosophy in their own right, as cinematic texts. The first version is the general claim that *all* philosophical interpretations are externally motivated inventions of the philosophers, who devise them in order to enlist a film in pursuit of some philosophical enquiry, either as an illustration or as some kind of philosophical intuition pump (Wartenberg 2007, 25). Wartenberg rightly rejects this global claim. In doing so, he distinguishes between audience-oriented interpretations of a film, which would include the class of interpretations described above, and creator-oriented interpretations, which focus on a film's intended content, and which, occasionally, will include philosophical content of one sort or another. Once this possibility has been introduced, Wartenberg suggests that we should now conceive of the imposition objection not as a rejection of the very possibility of films ever doing philosophy in their own right, but as “a regulative principle” for distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate interpretations (2007, 26).
It’s not clear precisely what might constitute an *inappropriate* external (i.e., audience-oriented) imposition of philosophical concerns onto a film, since the external philosophical motives (or other disciplinary motives) of the authors of such interpretations can be so varied. But Wartenberg is much clearer about the nature of *inappropriate* internal (creator-oriented) impositions, both in *Thinking on Screen*, and more recently in a response to two earlier papers of mine. In that response, Wartenberg elaborates on the meaning of ‘inappropriate’ in the context of internal interpretations by formulating an *Imposition Constraint* (IC): “Any philosophical interpretation of a film that does not (successfully) reconstruct relevant ‘authorial intentions’ of the filmmaker(s) is imposing the philosophy onto the film and therefore cannot legitimately claim that the film itself, rather than the interpreter, is actually doing the philosophy contained in the interpretation.”

Under this second, narrowly tailored version of the imposition objection, “only creator-oriented interpretations of a film can justify the claim that the film itself is philosophical.” (Wartenberg 2007, 26) But unlike the general imposition objection, there is now some room that permits at least some films to actually do philosophy on their own, since the philosophy is not always imposed on the film by others.

Wartenberg’s demarcation between appropriate and inappropriate interpretations of the *actual* philosophical content of films (when there is some) turns on the question of authorial intent. Whether the author is an individual, or a collective, is to be determined by who exercises artistic control over the production of a film. Audience-oriented philosophical interpretations of a film, devised by philosophically-minded viewers who wish to employ that film for their own illustrative purposes, simply don’t qualify as appropriate candidates for capturing the actual philosophical content of that film, because their motivation is external to the film to begin with. In such cases, the film itself is not doing philosophy. The philosophical critic who devised the externally imposed interpretation might be doing good or bad philosophy, depending on whether the interpretation is a plausible use of the film, and whether the ensuing philosophical claims are themselves interesting. But, in such cases, the critic is doing philosophy, not
the film.

In two previous articles that have appeared in this journal, I have argued that Wartenberg has overlooked a third possibility: some films may possess philosophical content which did not spring from the minds of their cinematic authors, but neither was it imposed from without. In other words, films can sometimes have cognitive philosophical content in the absence of agents being intentionally responsible for that content. I don't think this occurs frequently, but when it does happen, it constitutes a notably different way in which films are capable of doing philosophy, quite literally on their own.

I propose to expand on that claim here, chiefly by analyzing the implications of Wartenberg's Imposition Constraint, and then assessing its application by means of examples that illustrate the differences among the three types of philosophical interpretations of films referenced above. But first, a few words about the limited nature of this enterprise.

1. Background Assumptions

Obviously, the claim I am making about this third alternative relies on a raft of philosophically controversial concepts which I cannot hope to engage adequately here. What should I mean, for example, by a cinematic author to whom philosophical intent might be attributed? Since big budget films are inevitably collaborative enterprises, philosophical content can be contributed by philosophically disposed directors, scriptwriters, producers, film editors, cinematographers, actors, and even composers — perhaps most prominently from the first two, but not only those two.

One attractive alternative is Berys Gaut's multiple authorship view: commercial narrative films are, because of their causal history as collective enterprises, quite different from literary works with regard to their creative sources. But this approach then demands some account of collective intent, an enterprise well beyond the scope of this paper, and so a question which I am mostly going to set aside. Another attractive alternative is Paisley Livingston's suggestion that: “in some cases where more than one person has directly contributed to the making of a [cinematic] work, the word
‘author’ is aptly applied to a person who has played the role of the dominant coordinating collaborator in the creation of the work, provided, that is, that the work has been made by this person with the aim of expressing his or her attitudes.” The relevant attitudes in the present context would be that individual’s intent to convey more or less philosophical observations via the film.

While Livingston’s dominant coordinating collaborator is compatible with intentional attributions to the director alone, more often it will be shorthand for the central collaborator in a shared intentional project, the one who has the final say—as, for example, the collaboration of Carol Reed, David Selznick, and Graham Greene on *The Third Man*, in which the happy ending in Greene’s initial novella (and script) was vetoed by director Reed and producer Selznick. The apparent groundlessness of rumors that Orson Welles actually directed this film is another reminder that, where conflicting artistic judgments or conflicts over artistic authority might arise in the course of film production, there are usually institutional arrangements for resolving such conflicts. Livingston’s approach, where plausible, has the advantage of locating the locus of intentional action in a single (more or less consultative) consciousness. It also works reasonably well with Wartenberg’s approach in *Thinking on Screen*, and mine in the two articles cited above, since we both refer repeatedly to the specific intentions of directors.

Sometimes reference to what directors in particular may have intended is appropriate, because they exercise such dominant control over the final artistic product, as in Wartenberg’s discussion of Charlie Chaplin’s intentions in *Modern Times* (Wartenberg 2007, Chapter 3). Other times, aesthetic conflicts between the director and other artistic contributors to a film’s production give rise to competing meanings, as they do in an example both Wartenberg and I refer to, the conflicting intentions of director Spike Lee and his female lead, Annabella Sciorra, in *Jungle Fever*. Lee wanted Angie Tucci, Sciorra’s character, to be infatuated with Flipper Purify (Wesley Snipes) for the same superficial reason that Flipper was attracted to Angie: curiosity about the mythology surrounding interracial sexual difference. But Sciorra performed the role differently. She thought that Angie’s prior
experience of economic and cultural deprivation in Bensonhurst explains why she would fall in love with a professional man like Flipper. Wartenberg takes the view that these conflicting visions of Angie’s motivation render the film less philosophically coherent that it might have been under a unified directorial vision (Wartenberg 1999, 145-146, 149-151), while I regard the film as being philosophically enhanced by the conflict, albeit inadvertently.

In the present context, this example illustrates how a unified consultative consciousness, or even a collective intentionality, might not always exist in a film. Sometimes, disharmony among individual artistic visions may undermine plausible attribution of collective intent. In other cases, there may be no clear lines of authority. In Wartenberg’s account of the disagreement between Lee and Sciorra, for example, production dynamics prevented Lee from exercising the conflict resolution authority which directors usually enjoy: “I couldn’t put a gun to her head, and it was too far along in the shoot to fire her.” (Wartenberg 1999, 146) Whether the absence of a coherent unified intentionality among a film’s artistic contributors renders a film cognitively incoherent with respect to philosophical content is a further question, the central one in this article.

Then there is my initial, perhaps ill-fated, decision to borrow from Daniel Frampton the concept of a filmind to refer to the cohesive cognitive content that may sometimes reside in a philosophical film without being linked in any direct way with either the individual or the collective intent of the film’s makers (as I have already suggested to be the case in Jungle Fever, with respect to one of its main thematic elements). The idea is that such cognitive content would also reside in the film independently of the glosses of external critics, who utilize the film to further their own philosophical agendas. It is cut loose from intentional agency on both sides. I employ the term filmind to convey the idea that occasionally — rather rarely, I think — a film exhibits “a mind of its own” in the sense of possessing cognitive content that is delivered via multiple cinematic elements (i.e., typically not just the dialogue), but which is accompanied by no intentional agency to which we could point and say: “that mind (or these minds) was (were) intentionally responsible for the cognitive philosophical content of this film.”
The trouble with *filmind* as a terminological choice, though, is that it comes with its own rather occult baggage, associated with Frampton’s use of the term. One element of Frampton’s excesses is his inclination to apply the concept of a *filmind* nearly universally to narrative films, which I am not disposed to do. For me, the concept depends on the presence of a kind of *mindedness*, a body of cognitive content inherent in the film that is not directly dependent on the intentions of the film’s artistic creators.

Classifying such evidence of mindedness as distinctively *philosophical* need not always require the presentation of theses supported by arguments. As Cynthia Freeland points out in her comments at an APA Symposium on *Thinking on Screen*, this way of conceiving philosophical inquiry is unnecessarily rigid. By way of illustration, Freeland suggested that we not think of Wartenberg’s analysis of *The Third Man* (Wartenberg 2007, Chapter 6) as an argument in defense of the thesis about the limits of friendship, but as an Aristotelian exercise in the cultivation of moral insights about friendship. This happens through the viewer’s emotional suturing with Joseph Cotton’s character, Holly Martins, as Martins’ understanding of his friend Harry Lime’s character, and of the duties of friendship, evolve through a series of revelations over the course of the film (Freeland 101-102).

In his reply, Wartenberg agrees that the scope of his account of philosophical deliberation and reflection in *Thinking on Screen* is too narrow. But I take Wartenberg’s approach to have been strategic: demonstrate that films sometimes bear philosophical content in the most traditional sense advocated by philosophical conservatives like Bruce Russell (a proponent of the universal version of the imposition objection), and that will make contentions about the presence of other kinds of recognizably philosophical insights in films all the more plausible.

Returning to the choice of *filmind* (however conceived) as the locus of philosophical content in some films, perhaps I should have borrowed instead from the vocabulary of literary criticism, and referred to a constructed, fictional, hypothetical, or implied author (ignoring here any conceptual differences among these). The trouble with this approach is that the concept of an implied author is motivated ultimately by a desire to locate authorial
If cinematic authorship resides, on the one hand, in an individual filmmaker, there may be a gap between the views of the actual filmmaker and the product that necessitates assigning priority to the product, rather than the maker, by constructing a conditionalist intentionalism, an account of what the author of the cinematic text could have intended, as Wartenberg seems to be doing. Or perhaps we should embrace Livingston's partial actualist intentionalism, which relies to some degree on the author's actual (stated?) intentions, as constrained by a meshing condition: the attributed intentionality “meshes sufficiently with what is written, spoken, or otherwise put on display [in the film].”

If cinematic authorship resides, on the other hand, in collaborative enterprises, positing an implied author helps bridge the gap created by the ensuing ontological and epistemological problems associated with collective intent: the fictional author serves as an ontological proxy for that collective ensemble of minds, and as an approximation of any actual collective intent, given the difficulties of ascertaining its precise nature. (See Gaut 1997.)

Where my own project is concerned, however, the key problem with both of these ‘constructed author’ approaches is that they incorporate some account of intentional agency as an essential ingredient. I'm trying to suggest a more radical alternative, that there are also at least some cognitively coherent films from which the corresponding intentionality is nonetheless absent. So I find myself thus far stuck with the concept of a filmind, however infelicitous.

2. Internal and External Cinematic Intentionality

Perhaps another way to think of filminds might be in terms of Livingston's meshing condition, but without the attribution of intentionality to some authorial mind. It is worth noting that, in Livingston's discussion of conditionalist and partial actualist intentionalism referenced above (and underlying Wartenberg’s 2015 formulation of the Imposition Constraint, and also his methodology in Thinking on Screen), there is a heavy reliance on on-screen film content, and relatively little on the biographical details of the
artists engaged in producing that content, at the time of their involvement. Apart from concerns about committing the intentional fallacy, there is an unexamined assumption running through this entire line of discussion: if a film exhibits coherent reflective deliberation with respect to some recognizably philosophical thematic content, such material could never have emerged from the film without a clear causal connection that can be traced back to at least some of the individuals who had a hand in crafting that film. The appearance of intentionality implies actual intentionality, even if that intentional content may not always be readily distilled from the overt pronouncements of filmmakers. Such attributions are generally reasonable, a good rule of thumb. But it does not follow that this prediction should also be adopted as a universal principle.

My claim begs a particular question. If we know that the philosophical content alleged to be in a film is there because the filmmakers put it there, then it is incontrovertibly internal to the film. Externally imposed philosophical interpretations, on the above methodological principle, are precisely those for which it is prima facie unlikely that the filmmakers are responsible for provoking that interpretation of the film, and especially if there appears to be no evidence that they did so. Except for occasional disputes about what an allegedly philosophical film’s makers did or did not in fact do on their own initiative, this approach establishes a bright line between internal and external interpretations of films. Since I’m suggesting that we abandon this line of demarcation, because I’m claiming that some interpretations should be classified as internal despite absence of any reasons to think the filmmakers might have had such an interpretation in mind (and perhaps good reasons to think that they did not), how then can I hope to distinguish this particular subspecies of internal interpretations from “merely” external ones?

For starters, I believe that I am no worse off in this regard than Wartenberg, Livingston, or Stephen Mulhall, all of whom I believe to be engaged in essentially the same project.13 Certainly Wartenberg’s and Mulhall’s analyses of the philosophical content of films relies very heavily on the content of the films, not so much on the expressed intentions of
directors or other makers. And Livingston’s meshing condition involves explicit advice to attend closely to the actual content of a film. Because the resulting analyses have the appearance of intentionality, these philosophers then assume that the relevant intentions, at least in some attenuated sense, must have been present in the minds of filmmakers to begin with. There is, in other words, already an assumption at work in this body of philosophical literature, that we can distinguish meaningfully between internal and external interpretations based on cinematic content alone, without first referencing the expressed intentions of filmmakers.

So how do we tell the difference between internal and external interpretations, on their own merits, so to speak, with respect to film content? It’s probably impossible to come up with any systematic guidelines, given the variability of interpretations and of films themselves. At any rate, I am simply going to offer some illustrative examples.

For a straightforward example of an external interpretation, consider Nancy Steffen-Fluhr’s feminist psychoanalytic study of Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956). She argues that the film’s theme of maintaining one’s individuality against mindless herd conformity, coupled with “betrayal” by a woman, bears hidden psychological significance. When Becky (Dana Wynter), the weaker vessel, succumbs to sleep, is transformed into a pod person, and discloses Miles’ (Kevin McCarthy) location to the pod posse, the scene reveals a fear of commitment to romantic partners on the part of “the boys” involved in the production of this film (director Don Siegel, scriptwriter Daniel Mainwaring, producer Walter Wanger, and perhaps novelist Jack Finney). Commitment means death, or at least the termination of individual autonomy.

There is nothing overt in the film to suggest this reading. Second-wave feminism was in its infancy during the production of Body Snatchers in 1955, and Siegel, Mainwaring, and Wanger were unlikely to have been devotees of Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex. It’s clear that their conscious focus was on mindless 1950s conformity, and the corrosive social effects of Cold War propaganda. (I’ve also seen the film read in the opposite way: as being itself Cold War propaganda. But I think this a misreading, partly on account
of remarks made by the filmmakers themselves.) Steffen-Fluhr’s feminist reading of *Body Snatchers* is an unapologetic imposition from without, which she surely recognized. The film is not *doing* psychology, or feminist philosophy or cultural commentary, on her account. It becomes instead a revealing piece of evidence for a feminist psychoanalysis of the minds of its authors. That still says *something* about the significance of the content of the film, but at a considerable remove from any message plausibly intended by its authors, or inherent in that content, understood on its own terms.

Readings “against the grain”, like Steffen-Fluhr’s, are thus described precisely because the films in question were clearly never intended by their creators to be read in such a fashion.\(^{15}\) These have a long history, beginning perhaps with camp interpretations of classic conventional Hollywood romantic comedies and tragicomedies, which treat such films as unintentional parodies of heteronormative gender performativity. Such interpretations are transparently external. But even this conclusion is not always clear. What about camp interpretations of the 1950 Bette Davis/George Saunders/Anne Baxter film, *All About Eve*? Are such interpretations external to *that* film, given the many camp elements that are notably internal to the film, which portrays its characters as engaged in performative roles not only with respect to their identities as Broadway (and Hollywood) “types”, but also with respect to gender and sexual orientation? And yet, this same film has also been read as a homophobic screed,\(^{16}\) and *heteronormativity* wasn’t yet on the cultural horizon. Sometimes the boundary between internal and external interpretations may be blurry. A post-second-wave feminist reading of *All About Eve* is surely too anachronistic to count as an internal interpretation of that particular film, however.

3. *Stephen Mulhall’s Alien Franchise Interpretation Project*

What then about the converse cases? Are there unambiguously internal readings of films which are nonetheless disconnected from the intentional framework of their makers? I have already argued in my previous articles on this topic that Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever* and Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* qualify as such. In the first case, the director and one of the principle actors
had conflicting visions about role of the actor’s character. The resulting partial intentional vacuum leads to an unanticipated different message, but one still internal to, and projected by, the film itself. In the second case, I argued that while *Memento*’s plot is often read (by philosophers) as a reflection on the failings of a Lockean account of personhood in terms of memory, favoring instead a Humean/Parfitian bundle theory, it may instead be read, in terms of its own narrative content and dramatic impact on the viewer, as advocating an Aristotelian concept of personhood (in terms of settled character dispositions), pitting that theory against the Lockean alternative. I contended that certain aspects of the film’s plot actually provoke the Aristotelian view. I then suggested that Nolan himself would have been unlikely to think of this novel philosophical pairing (and I’ve found no evidence that he did), even though he may well have had the Lockean picture in mind as a target for cinematic criticism, because both the memory account of personhood, and its failings, are culturally familiar territory. As Wartenberg rightly reminds us in *Thinking on Screen*, a director doesn’t have to be familiar with the history of philosophy to be familiar with ideas that it has generated.¹⁷

Wartenberg is unpersuaded that my interpretations of either film qualify as internal interpretations. I suspect that this is because it’s quite plausible to attribute other interpretive visions to the directors of each film, as Wartenberg himself does in considerable persuasive detail in the case of Spike Lee’s vision for *Jungle Fever*.¹⁸ Because my interpretations of these films diverge from more standard readings of their philosophical content, ones linked to the likely (or stated) intentions of their directors, mine must therefore be externally imposed. At least, I suspect that’s at the foundation of Wartenberg’s reaction. But that’s simply to classify my unorthodox interpretations as external by definition — the demarcation criterion for distinguishing between internal and external interpretation that I attributed to Wartenberg in my introductory remarks above.

Clearly, I’m not going to persuade Wartenberg by claiming that it is the film itself, elements of the plot, of dialogue, and of relationship dynamics between Angie and Flipper in *Jungle Fever*, between Leonard and Teddy
in *Memento*, that provoked these interpretations. That much is at least autobiographically true; these interpretations simply wouldn’t have occurred to me without the provocation of the films themselves. But to persuade skeptics, perhaps a different tack is needed.

To that end, I want to turn now to Stephen Mulhall’s treatment of the *Alien* franchise in *On Film*, specifically his interpretation of David Fincher’s *Alien³* (1992). Mulhall identifies Fincher as the principal author of *Alien³*, a point which I will contest later. But first, to appreciate Mulhall’s assessment of the philosophical significance of *Alien³*, we have to have some understanding of his interpretations of the first two entries in this series, Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979), and James Cameron’s *Aliens* (1986). That’s because Mulhall also has a particular interest in sequels, because of the opportunity they afford a new director to reflect on both the aesthetic and the philosophical significance of earlier films in the series, and then incorporate those reflections in the new film, an overt opportunity to do philosophical work in a cinematic medium.¹⁹ So to understand Mulhall’s analysis of *Alien³*, we have to know to what it is that the author(s) of this film are reacting to, in the cinematic world of the *Alien* franchise.

At the outset of *On Film*, Stephen Mulhall motivates his “unpromising” choice of the *Alien* franchise as the evidentiary basis for his thesis that at least some fictional commercial films can philosophize. Among other reasons, he suggests that all the *Alien* films “are preoccupied…with a variety of interrelated anxieties about human identity — about…individual integrity and its relation to the body, sexual difference, and nature… How sharply does my gender define me? …Is sexual reproduction a threat to my integrity, and, if so, does the reality and nature of the threat depend on whether I am a man or a woman?” (Mulhall 3) More generally, Mulhall labels this set of anxieties “the issue [of] the relation of human identity to embodiment.” (Mulhall 3)

Thus, in his discussion of Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979), Mulhall points out the extent to which the alien’s reproductive mechanism is invasive, violent, predatory, and parasitic on the host body required for gestation. This very negative metaphor for human breeding — a parable motivated by some
elements of second-wave feminism, culturally ascendant in the late seventies — is, according to Mulhall, more effectively conveyed to male viewers (in particular) by making Kane (John Hurt) the host body, and rendered darker by the main female character’s response to her own body’s biological legacy. Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), in order “to become capable and worthy of vanquishing her opponent…must sever the connection between femaleness, heterosexual intercourse, and fertility — she must, in short, deny her body’s openness to fertility.” (Mulhall 25) For Ripley, her female body is a betrayal of her individual integrity; “her drive for survival” must therefore be linked with “her equally resolute repression of her desire to reproduce.” (Mulhall 25)

The first point to be made here is that there is philosophical content to this film. Mulhall’s analysis of the film’s treatment of female embodiment and individual integrity is in fact precisely what Wartenberg means when he says that films can do philosophy. For Wartenberg, films do philosophy in three ways: as illustrations of philosophical theories, as counterexamples to them, and as thought experiments provoking philosophical insights, with each category normally (but not always) being heavily narrative-driven. Mulhall’s account of Alien falls to some extent in the illustration category (Ripley’s character as a response to the pressures of reproductive serfdom; the alien’s reproductive strategy as a visually dramatic metaphor for that serfdom), and to some extent in the thought experiment category (using a male host body for the alien spawn to make the relevant feminist reading of reproduction more compelling to male viewers).

As mentioned earlier, Mulhall also has a particular interest in sequels, because of the opportunity they afford a new director to reflect on the philosophical significance of earlier films in the series, and then incorporate those reflections in the new film, an overt opportunity to do philosophical work in a cinematic medium. That is very much how Mulhall reads James Cameron’s efforts in Aliens (1986), David Fincher’s in Alien³ (1992), Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s in Alien Resurrection (1997), and in a fascinating addendum in the third edition of On Film, how he reads Ridley Scott’s novel twists to the franchise in Prometheus (2012). In this regard, the later films also
function as implicit aesthetic commentaries on their predecessors as films, an inherently cinematic analysis in the sense that it evaluates the earlier films as works of fictional cinematic art. But for Mulhall, those retrospective evaluations are more broadly philosophical as well as aesthetic, with the non-aesthetic philosophical component understood as a reassessment of the conceptualization of embodied identity in the previous film(s).

Thus, James Cameron’s Aliens, with its creation of a nuclear family consisting of Ripley, Marine Corporal Dwayne Hicks (Michael Biehn), and their “adoptive” daughter Newt (Carrie Henn), can be understood as a more positive resolution of the dark and lonely world viewers are left with at the end of Alien. The film’s awakening of Ripley’s maternal instincts—her protective behavior towards Newt—constitutes a new dimension to Ripley’s character, one deliberately omitted in the first film, in which Ripley repudiated her “biologically ordained” role in favor of preservation of her integrity as an individual. That change, together with the emergence of the nuclear family which survives the alien challenge, invites us to regard Cameron’s makeover as both a more positive (and audience-pleasing) resolution of the franchise’s collective narrative, and a more conventional restoration of the heteronormative order, a repudiation of the first film’s militant feminism.

Finally, Fincher’s Alien³ can be understood in turn as a repudiation of the heteronormative recidivism of Cameron’s Aliens, and a return to the original cinematic world created by Ridley Scott. This is achieved starkly and violently at the opening of Alien³ by killing off the other members of Ripley’s nuclear family, when the Sulaco’s escape pod crashes on the dismal and forlorn planet, Fiorina 161. This leaves Ripley very much alone again, relying almost entirely on her own wits in a hostile prison world populated entirely by male convicts and staff. After viewers’ arduous journey through Aliens, Fincher’s take-no-prisoners approach, while perhaps more artistically compatible with Alien, infuriated many conventionally-minded fans of Aliens, and earned the film an undeservedly bad reputation. Or so the story goes…
4. Alien³ and Wartenberg’s Imposition Constraint

Ridley Scott’s Alien and James Cameron’s Aliens work well for Mulhall’s interpretive purposes. In the first film, Scott was the central catalyst in a genuine collaboration (with some tensions) among visionaries who embarked on this novel sci-fi/horror cross genre project: the original script writers Dan O’Bannon and Ronald Shusett, artistically engaged producers David Giler and Walter Hill (who were heavily involved in script rewrites), H.R. Giger (the artist who devised the look for the alien), the set design team, and the strong ensemble of actors who played the Nostromo’s astronauts. In the second film, after his recent success with another female protagonist in another sci-fi vehicle — Sarah Connor in The Terminator (1984), with her own exotic nuclear family and methods of dealing with nihilism in another world afflicted with out-of-control technology — James Cameron was granted a striking measure of artistic control, the kind of control which Mulhall appears to attribute to directors of all the films he analyzes in On Film. Cameron not only directed Aliens, but also devised the storyline and wrote the script.

But none of these claims can be made for Alien³. With respect to this film, Mulhall clearly does in fact what Wartenberg did by means of definition via his Imposition Constraint: he attributes an authorial voice to a film with philosophical content simply because the film itself speaks in a philosophical voice. But Fincher himself has repeatedly repudiated creative ownership of Alien³:

My first movie, it is fairly well known, was a disaster. I stupidly felt that the people who were financing it had more to lose than I did, if it was bad. I sort of allowed myself to be steered into this communal making and then when the shit hit the fan, all of a sudden everybody scattered and I was nearly...the only guy standing there, going wait, who’s got a suggestion now? So if I’m going to take the blame, I’m going to take the brunt of it, I’m going to make the decisions.²³

The reality of this film’s production involved several years of barely controlled chaos, several wildly divergent scripts, serially recruited and
departing writers and directors, and a still-unfinished script undergoing its \(n\)th iteration at the hands of the producers — what Livingston has labeled a traffic jam movie:

...an extreme case in which a film gets made by a number of professional filmmakers who are hired and fired in succession by warring producers who themselves have no overarching scheme for the organization of these individuals' disparate contributions. One person's story idea is sent to someone else who writes a script, which then gets doctored by several other parties; in the process of shooting and editing the film, drastic changes get made by a series of directors and producers who have little or no interest in, or awareness of, each other's plans...The emergent product resembles a traffic jam in that many of its final features were never the object of anyone's intentions and can be attributed to no one...an aggregate of uncoordinated intentional actions.\(^{24}\)

Alien\(^1\) was just such a pre-production mess, into which Fincher was brought very late (on the eve of shooting) as a first-time feature film director, with very little artistic control.\(^{25}\) The decision to kill off Ripley's adoptive family came late, in the fourth major script,\(^{26}\) composed by John Fasano from a plot outline devised by Fincher's predecessor, Vincent Ward. The decision to bring Ripley back for the film (other than a cameo role) wasn't made until partway through David Twohy's stint as the third scriptwriter, and the decision to kill off Ripley herself at the end of the film came later still, in the post-Larry Ferguson amalgamation of bits and pieces of the earlier scripts by producers Walter Hill and David Giler.\(^{27}\) But it was not in any of the earlier scripts, including the immediately preceding Fasano/Ward script, which does have Ripley gestating an alien.\(^{28}\) In their amalgamation, the two producers borrowed the prison planet from David Twohy, the third scriptwriter, while the prisoners' religious cult, and some characters, came from the Fasano/Ward script. It's unclear whether Fincher, brought on board about the same time as Larry Ferguson (for an emergency script rewrite), had any role in the decision to kill Ripley.\(^{29}\) He certainly had little say in any of the other major elements of the script.

What then, should we say about Mulhall's reading of Alien\(^2?\) There was
no brooding omnipresence in the sky that constituted the deified human mind orchestrating the production details of that film. Is Mulhall’s account of Alien’s relationship to its franchise predecessors nothing more than a product of his fevered imagination? That is one possible analysis. Certainly when Paisley Livingston describes traffic jam movies, he is not expecting the end product to come with a rich philosophical narrative. Perhaps the various elements of this film came together for causally disconnected reasons — a decision to eliminate Hicks and Newt might have been dictated in part by the decision to use Twohy’s prison planet idea, for example. That scenario would have made at least Newt’s presence among a population of aggressive sexually violent convicts problematic.

Eliminating the two of them also had the advantage of throwing Ripley back on her own resources, if the point was to emulate the horror-suspense drama of Ridley Scott’s first entry into the franchise, as many have suggested. This explanation is particularly plausible in the face of mounting desperation to come up with a coherent strategy for a sequel, driven by the large financial investment in three years of preproduction drift.

On the other hand, the internal coherence of Mulhall’s analysis of Alien is quite appealing. Must we choose between (1) unfocused chaos followed by a half-heartedly derivative replay of Ridley Scott’s original, or (2) Fincher’s allegedly miraculous ability to transform a sow’s ear into a silk purse? Should we perhaps attribute authorship, and the philosophy in Alien to Giler and Hill instead, the two artistically engaged members of the production triumvirate? After all, it was they who hired and fired various writers and directors, and who ultimately cobbled together the final script from pieces of the earlier ones, often ignoring Fincher’s judgment. But there are good reasons to think that those decisions were driven by practical production considerations of the sort I described above, not by a desire to achieve a nuanced philosophical commentary on the two previous entries in the franchise.

There is a fallacy of false bifurcation latent in Wartenberg’s and Mulhall’s division between creator-generated and allegedly external interpretations. It is possible for a film to have substantive cognitive content of a philosophical
nature without the presence of identifiable authorial intention. *Alien* is, I think, is precisely such an example. There is a significant difference between Mulhall’s reading of the philosophical content of *Alien* and the effects of waves on a beach coincidentally pushing stones into an array that appears to read 'help'. There is no intentionality at all in the latter case, but Mulhall’s analysis of the film in the former case is not a self-generated inspiration. Driven by the film’s content, it is internal, though not creator-oriented. My analyses of parts of the philosophical significance of *Jungle Fever* and *Memento* were similarly content-driven, even though both those films were also the product of coherent creative intention. Films can have multiple internal interpretations, of course.

5. Addendum: Ellen Ripley’s Alleged Celibacy

If internal interpretations are sometimes plausible even in the absence of any clear authorial voice, what then would ever count against an interpretation being considered as internal, apart from cases of transparently reading a film against the grain, as with my illustration of Steffen-Fluhr’s analysis of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* earlier? Here too I can only offer an illustrative example, and Mulhall inadvertently furnishes us with a nice one:

The alien’s distinctive mode of parasitic predation is profoundly shocking to the men in the crew, to whom a female subject position — one of vulnerability to rape, impregnation, and giving birth — is essentially alienating and traumatizing... Such male monstrosity is no surprise to Ripley at all; it is rather a confirmation of her basic view of the world of human sexual difference, and an opportunity for her to act on her long matured comprehension of how to oppose its essential monstrosity — by doing whatever it might take to avoid the violation of heterosexual intercourse. In short, ...Ripley’s emergence as the human hero of this tale is empowered or underwritten by her implied celibacy... The purity of her resolution here is precisely what makes her a match for the pure hostility of the alien: she is as profoundly attuned to, and as psychologically well equipped for, survival as the alien itself. (Mulhall 15)
There is an attractive symmetry between the alien queen’s fecundity in the second film of the series, and Ripley’s alleged repudiation of fecundity. In fact, this is a bit of reverse engineering on Mulhall’s part, based on the image of the Queen with her brood and biological imperative to reproduce her kind. But that’s an image born of Cameron’s sequel. It’s only a topic for further development in the first film, the daily script of which contains a sexual interlude between Ripley and Captain Dallas (Tom Skerritt), which was cut before shooting, for reasons that probably had nothing to do with Ripley’s putative celibacy.

Once Mulhall introduces this theme for the first film of the franchise, he feels compelled to stick with it. In his analysis of Aliens, he uses the idea to explain why Ripley comes to acquire a family — Newt and Corporal Hicks — without sexual congress, thus sustaining the virginal Artemis image Mulhall has crafted for Ripley in the first film. He explains away the scene in Cameron’s director’s cut (not in the original theatrical release) in which Ripley’s biological daughter died during the fifty-seven years of Ripley’s hypersleep, by describing its absence as a textbook example of how non-aesthetic considerations (the need to trim a movie in order to maximize potential daily box-office) can engender aesthetic improvements, and of a director’s ability to lose touch with his own best insights (Mulhall 51, note 6). In other words, Cameron temporarily lost his grip, when he filmed this scene in the first place!

In Alien³, Mulhall asks what we are “to make of the fact that in Alien³ Ripley not only experiences heterosexual intercourse for the first time, but initiates it, and appears to regard it as enjoyable and fulfilling?” (Mulhall 58) He answers by suggesting that Ripley has now granted herself permission to do so, because she is subconsciously aware that she has already been invaded by an alien parasite, and her virginal purity is a thing of the past, anyway.

But there is not a shred of evidence to support Mulhall’s claim that “Ripley’s emergence as the human hero of this tale is empowered or underwritten by her implied celibacy”. By the time he interprets the third film in the series, Mulhall has built himself an extended psychoanalytic edifice that accounts for Ripley’s character based on this premise, and there
is no going back. Rather than attribute Ripley's willingness to have sex with Clemens to their unique bond of trust (she lets him shoot her up with potent medications after he tells her how he accidentally killed eleven patients by administering lethal dosages of drugs), he proposes a much less plausible explanation that fits with his previous accounts.

I would contend that this particular aspect of Mulhall’s interpretation of all three films counts as an externally imposed reading, while, on the other hand, Mulhall's reading of *Alien* as a repudiation of the heteronormative recidivism of Cameron's *Aliens* can reasonably be regarded as internal to the film's narrative, i.e., generated by it. The only thing wrong with the Cameron repudiation analysis was Mulhall’s decision to attribute the end product to David Fincher's intentionality, or specifically to any of the creative minds involved.

The final script was thrown together in desperation by Giler and Hill, borrowing elements from David Twohy's earlier script (prison planet) and Vincent Ward/John Fasano (a religious community, some new characters), with an eye to producing what they hoped would be a straightforward horror/action movie. The decision to kill off Ripley's nuclear family was made well before Fincher's arrival, for reasons having nothing to do with repudiating James Cameron's vision. Even the decision to kill off Ripley may not have been Fincher's. Films are cultural artifacts, of course, and doubly so when they are components of a franchise. All of the artists involved with *Alien* were making contributions in that context, which undoubtedly helped to ground the film's philosophical coherence. But given the film's history as a traffic jam movie, there's no reason to assume that a cohesive human intentionality underlies the end result, or that Wartenberg's Imposition Constraint should require the presence of authorial intent in *all* cases of internal interpretations. Exceptions are possible.

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detailed and sensible comments. This paper has benefitted greatly from that feedback.

Notes

1. Thomas E. Wartenberg, Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy (Routledge, 2007).
2. Thomas E. Wartenberg, "The Imposition Objection Reconsidered: A Response to Richard Nunn," Film and Philosophy 19 (2015), 1-14, at 3. Wartenberg suggests there that I misdescribe the original imposition objection, that I mistakenly suggest that he endorses the imposition objection so described, and that I fail to understand what he is really arguing for (IC).
8. "Occult" in the sense that Gottfried Leibniz famously accused Isaac Newton (e.g., in a 1711 letter to Nicholas Hartsocker) of devising an occult gravitational force that acted magically at a distance. Frampton's film mind sometimes seems very much like an occult force emergent in feature films, the details of its workings quite mysterious and quasi-magical.
12. Livingston 2009, 99. For his general discussion of conditional and (partial) actualist intentionalism, see 86-93. I'm not persuaded that his approach differs significantly from Wartenberg's.
15. On this point, Mulhall observes that such interpretations treat a film as a cultural artifact which "has no say in what we are to make of it, no voice in the history of its own reception or comprehension." (Mulhall 2001, 7; 2016, 6. Page references hereafter are to 2016 edition.)
17. Wartenberg's example is John Ford's The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, which he reads as a
reflection on Nietzsche's critique of Hegel's theory of historical progress. (Wartenberg 2007 4-9)

18. (Wartenberg 1999). Unlike some directors, Lee is often forthcoming about his own intentions with regard to his projects.

19. On page 5 Mulhall says, for example, that: “These films can be thought of as generated by reflective engagement with their own status as sequels... we could say that the series as a whole makes progress by reflecting upon the conditions of its own possibility.”

20. See Thinking on Screen, Chapters 3-5. Note that Wartenberg's analyses are not exclusively narrative-driven; other cinematic elements may play a role, too — e.g., his discussion of tilted camera angles to denote potentially unreliable testimony of characters populating Carol Reed's The Third Man. (Thinking on Screen, 99-101, and Chapter 6 more generally).

21. Mulhall's actual arguments on this point constitute a striking contrast to Tom Wartenberg's suggestion that Mulhall "fails to provide... an explanation how a cultural form other than philosophy itself... can make a substantial contribution to... philosophical discussion of an issue such as that of human embodiment." Thinking on Screen, 37. Note also that Mulhall assumes that male viewers are going to identify more with male characters, a view which might be disputed today, but probably not in 1978, when Alien was in production.

22. Ripley's concern to rescue Jones, the Nostromo's cat, is a notable exception to this portrait.

23. Danny Leigh, 2011 Interview with David Fincher, BBC1
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ITrWku8On4&feature=player_embedded
   For similar examples in other venues, see "David Fincher on Alien 3... A few words"
   http://www.prometheus2-movie.com/community/forums/topic/14069


25. For a succinct account of the chaos, see Douglas Perry & John L Flynn, "Bald Ambition," Cinescape 2, #3 (December 1995). Available online at:
   http://www.michaelbiehn.co.uk/gallery/displayimage.php?album=593&pid=21866#top_display_media

26. For the five major scripts entertained at various times by the producers, see:
   https://alienseries.wordpress.com/2013/12/18/cold-wars-william-gibsons-alien-iii/
   (A detailed summary of William Gibson's 1987 script)
   http://www.horrorlair.com/scripts/alien3_red.html
   (Eric Red 1989)
   http://www.scifiscripts.com/scripts/alien3_twohy.txt
   (David Twohy 1989)
   http://www.horrorlair.com/scripts/alien3_fasano.html
   (Vincent Ward/John Fasano 1990)
   https://sfy.ru/?script=alien3_hill
   (Giler & Hill final April 10, 1991 script)

27. See the December 18, 1990 version, several months earlier than the shooting script cited above:

28. That script has another character pushing the embryonic chest burster up out of Ripley's torso and mouth into his own in an act of self-sacrifice.

29. Ferguson's script, which Fincher ridiculed in an interview, appears to have been the first to end in Ripley's death. See John H Richardson, "Mother from Another Planet," Premiere 5 (May, 1992), 62-70.


31. See Richardson generally, and White's comments on the early death of Charles Dance's character, Clemens.

32. I owe this example to an anonymous Film and Philosophy referee.