



MEMBER PICKS

The Andromeda Strain

The Andromeda Strain

Director: Robert Wise

Production Companies: Universal Pictures,
Robert Wise Productions

Producer: Robert Wise

Production Manager: Ernest B. Wehmeyer

Assistant Director: Ridgeway Callow

Script: Nelson Gidding

Based on the novel by: Michael Crichton

Photography: Richard H. Kline

Special Photographic Effects: Douglas Trumbull,
Jamie Shourt

Editors: Stuart Gilmore, John W. Holmes

Production Designer: Boris Leven

Art Director: William Tuntke

Set Decorator: Ruby Levitt

Title Design: Attila De Lado

Titles: Universal Title

Music: Gil Mellé

Music Engineering: Allan Sohl, Gordon Clark

Sound: Waldon O. Watson, James Alexander,
Ronald Pierce

Technical Advisers: Richard Green,
George Hobby, William Koselka

Cast:

Arthur Hill (*Dr Jeremy Stone*)

David Wayne (*Dr Charles Dutton*)

James Olson (*Dr Mark Hall*)

Kate Reid (*Dr Ruth Leavitt*)

Paula Kelly (*Karen Anson*)

George Mitchell (*Jackson*)

Ramon Bieri (*Major Mancheck*)

Kermit Murdock (*Dr Robertson*)

Richard O'Brien (*Grimes*)

Eric Christmas (*Senator from Vermont*)

Peter Hobbs (*General Sparks*)

USA 1971

131 mins

Digital

'This is a thrilling plague film from 1971 – an imagining of future events. I've loved it since I first saw it.'

Pamela Davies, BFI Member

A satellite crashes in a small New Mexico town. Before long, the whole community is wiped out by a suspected alien virus. The government sends in a small team of scientists, who put themselves at huge risk while they examine the cause of the deaths. This faithful and thrilling take on Michael Crichton's novel, featuring special effects by Douglas Trumbull, remains prescient, given the paranoia surrounding recent global events.

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In May 1969, former medical student Michael Crichton published his first novel under his own name (he'd already published three under the name John Lange and a fourth as Jeffrey Hudson, none of them genre). *The Andromeda Strain* was an instant hit with the critics and went on to become a best-seller, starting his long career with a bang. The film rights were snapped up by Universal who handed the project over to director Robert Wise who, in turn, commissioned an adaptation from his regular collaborator Nelson Gidding.

An American satellite code-named Scoop, crashes outside the small New Mexico town of Piedmont. When a retrieval team turns up looking for it, they find most of the town's population dead. The authorities gather together an elite team of scientists to investigate the disaster, installing them at the hi-tech underground Wildfire facility, a top secret base in Nevada. Team leader Dr Jeremy Stone (Arthur Hill) and surgeon Dr Mark Hall (James Olson) venture into Piedmont and find two survivors, a very young baby and a drunk (George Mitchell) – they also discover that the victims died, some at their own hands, when their blood turned to powder. At Wildfire, the team – which also includes Dr Charles Dutton (David Wayne) and Dr Ruth Leavitt (Kate Reid) – realise that they're dealing with a microscopic alien life form code-named Andromeda, a life form that is rapidly evolving. As the team begins to make breakthroughs, Andromeda evolves into something that can eat through plastic and when it threatens to escape the base, Wildfire activates its nuclear self-destruct system and the race is on to deactivate it before it goes off, allowing Andromeda to feed on its energy and multiply into a swarm that could wipe out the human race.

The film opens with a fake acknowledgment card suggesting that the events actually happened, a commonplace cinematic gimmick today but something fairly unusual at the time. It sets up the almost documentary-like approach to the novel adopted by Gidding and Wise, playing it like a procedural – the team is assembled and they begin piecing together the clues methodically, their often mundane labours pored over obsessively and with rigorous and uncompromising scientific verisimilitude (the scene of the monkey apparently dying after being exposed to Andromeda is incredibly distressing).

It was perhaps too methodical for some who find the film over-long and a little slow but *The Andromeda Strain* is never less than gripping. It's not a snappily based thriller but it still manages to keep its audience enthralled as the team struggle to head off a 'biological crisis', slowly arriving at the truth about what Andromeda is and what it could do the Earth if it gets free. It's a great example of the type of proper, serious science fiction cinema that was prevalent at the time.

Gidding's script follows an unusual structure, initially jumping backwards and forwards in time in its first act, including to scenes of a hearing looking into the

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IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Re-release Preview: Pressure + panel discussion
Mon 23 Oct 20:10

TV Preview: The Lazarus Project + Q&A with cast
Paapa Essiedu, Caroline Quentin, Anjli Mohindra
and writer Joe Barton

Tue 24 Oct 18:15

Thelma Schoonmaker in Conversation

Thu 26 Oct 18:30

Preview: How to Have Sex + Q&A with director
Molly Manning Walker and actor Mia McKenna-
Bruce

Wed 1 Nov 20:45

**23 Seconds to Eternity + BFI DVD & Blu-ray
launch + Q&A with director Bill Butt**

Mon 6 Nov 18:10

Preview: The Eternal Daughter + Q&A with writer-
director Joanna Hogg and actor Tilda Swinton

Fri 10 Nov 19:00

Exhibition: The Red Shoes: Beyond the Mirror

From Fri 10 Nov to Sun 7 Jan

Matthew Bourne's production of The Red Shoes
+ Q&A with Matthew Bourne and Ashley Shaw

Sat 11 Nov 15:00

Preview: Is There Anybody Out There? + Q&A
with director Ella Glendining, hosted by Jack
Thorne

Sat 11 Nov 17:45

Preview: The Red Shoes

Sun 12 Nov 15:30

**Preview: Typist Artist Pirate King + Q&A with
director Carol Morley, cast Monica Dolan, Gina
McKee and Kieran Bew, producer Cairo Cannon,
composer Carly Paradis and editor Alex Mackie**

Mon 13 Nov 17:55

Journey to Italy Viaggio in Italia + extended
introduction by Jeremy Cooper and Ben Rivers

Mon 13 Nov 20:40

Joanna Hogg in Conversation

Wed 15 Nov 18:30

**Talk: The Creative Worlds of Powell +
Pressburger**

Sat 25 Nov 12:00-17:00

**TV Preview: Vigil + Q&A with cast Suranne
Jones, Romola Garai, Dougray Scott and writer
Tom Edge**

Mon 27 Nov 18:15

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incident, before settling down once the team is installed in Wildfire. The third and final act becomes a more generic thriller as Hall scrambles to find a working station that he can use to deactivate the bomb, dodging computerised lasers and fighting off the effects of a gas that has been released by the base. It's more traditional than the first two acts but it's incredibly tense – the bleak nihilism of late 60s and early 70s screen science fiction left audiences unsure whether or not Hall would actually make it in time.

As with so much of Crichton's work, Mankind has become too dependant on its technology, too blasé about our ability to control it. Messages between Wildfire and their superiors go unnoticed after a stray sliver of paper in a printer silences the bell that alerts them to incoming messages and the over-the-top self destruct mechanism threatens not only the only people capable of stopping Andromeda – which was brought to Earth in the first place by one of our own satellites – but the entire world. The real threat doesn't come from Andromeda but from our own scientific hubris – 'We did it to ourselves,' Dutton notes.

One of the common criticisms of the film is that the characters are cold, unapproachable and to a degree this is true though it's likely to have been a very deliberate choice to play them that way. They're scientists, focused only on one task which they pursue with single-minded determination. It's one of the finest representations of real scientists doing actual science ever seen on screen. In 2003, Georgios Pappas, Savvas Seitaridis, Nikolaos Akritidis and Epaminondas Tsianos published a paper in the scientific journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, a publication of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, titled *Infectious Diseases in Cinema: Virus Hunters and Killer Microbes* in which they hailed *The Andromeda Strain* as 'the most significant, scientifically accurate, and prototypic of all films of this genre.'

The notable exception to the rather bland leads is Kate Reid who sticks out a mile from her straight laced, buttoned-down colleagues. Her character, Levitt (who has a strange, out-of-the-blue epileptic fit at one key moment, a development that comes out of nowhere and is never developed) was originally a man in the book and when Gidding chose to switch genders, Wise was initially worried that she'd become mere eye candy, like Raquel Welch's character in Richard Fleischer's *Fantastic Voyage* (1966). But Wise quickly came to realise that Leavitt, thanks in no small part to Reid's excellent performance, was what he later called 'the most interesting character' in the film.

Blessed with a fantastically weird, partly electronic score from jazz musician Gil Mellé and brilliant production design courtesy of Boris Leven (who had designed Wise's *West Side Story* (1961) and *The Sound of Music* (1965) and who was nominated for an Academy Award for his work here) *The Andromeda Strain* looks and sounds magnificent. Wise makes atmospheric, and sometimes very funny, use of deep focus and split screen and the film was a pioneer in the use of computerised effects thanks to Doug Trumbull, James Shourt and Albert Whitlock.

The Andromeda Strain is a long film that moves at its own deliberate pace but it's never less than utterly enthralling throughout. The film wasn't as warmly received as the novel but it remains an excellent example of a kind of science fiction cinema that has become vanishingly rare these days, one that revels in its science and which dares its audience to keep up with it, never talking down to them or patronising them. The novel was adapted again as a not terribly impressive two-part television mini-series directed by Mikael Salomon in 2008.

Kevin Lyons, The EOFFTV Review, eofftvreview.wordpress.com, 10 September 2019