



## Ridley Scott: Building Cinematic Worlds

# Alien

### Alien

*Directed by:* Ridley Scott  
©: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation  
*Production Company:* Brandywine Productions  
*Made by:* Twentieth Century-Fox Productions Ltd  
*Executive Producer:* Ronald Shusett  
*Produced by:* Gordon Carroll, David Giler, Walter Hill  
*Associate Producer:* Ivor Powell  
*Production Executive:* Mark Haggard  
*Production Manager:* Garth Thomas  
*Production Accountant:* Bill Finch  
*1st Assistant Directors:* Paul Ibbetson, Raymond Becket  
*Assistant Director:* Steve Harding  
*Assistant to Director:* Sandy Molloy  
*Trainee Assistant Director:* Bob Jordan  
*Continuity:* Kay Fenton  
*USA Casting:* Mary Goldberg  
*UK Casting:* Mary Selway  
*Screenplay by:* Dan O'Bannon, Walter Hill  
*Screenplay:* David Giler \*  
*Story by:* Dan O'Bannon, Ronald Shusett  
*Director of Photography:* Derek Vanlint  
*Miniature Effects Director of Photography:* Denys Ayling  
*Camera Focus:* Adrian Biddle, Colin Davidson  
*Lighting Gaffer:* Ray Evans  
*Key Grip:* Jimmy Walters  
*Electronics/Video Co-ordinator:* Dick Hewitt  
*Stills:* Bob Penn  
*Matte Artist:* Ray Cagle  
*Special Effects Supervisors:* Brian Johnson, Nick Allder  
*'Alien' Design:* H.R. Giger  
*Small 'Alien' Forms Co-designed/Made by:* Roger Dicken  
*'Alien' Head Effects Created by:* Carlo Rambaldi, Clinton Cavers  
*Additional 'Alien' Mechanics:* Carlo Demarchis  
*Additional 'Alien' Mechanics:* David Watling  
*Floor Effects Supervisor:* Allan Bryce  
*Supervising Model Makers:* Martin Bower, Bill Pearson  
*Supervising Modellers:* Peter Voysey, Eddie Butler  
*Special Graphic Effects by:* Bernard Lodge  
*Film Editors:* Terry Rawlings, Peter Weatherley  
*1st Assistant Editors:* Les Healey, Peter Culverwell, Bridget Reiss  
*Assistant Film Editors:* Peter Baldock, Maureen Lyndon  
*Production Designer:* Michael Seymour  
*Visual Design Consultant:* Dan O'Bannon  
*Art Directors:* Les Dilley, Roger Christian  
*Assistant Art Directors:* Jonathan Amberston, Benjamin Fernández  
*Set Decorator:* Ian Whittaker  
*Concept Artists:* Jean 'Moëbius' Giraud, Chris Foss, Ron Cobb  
*Property Masters:* Dave Jordan, Jill Quertier  
*Construction Manager:* Bill Welch  
*Costume Designer:* John Mollo  
*Wardrobe Supervisor:* Tiny Nicholls  
*Make-up Supervisor:* Tommy Manderson  
*Make-up:* Pat Hay  
*Hairdresser:* Sarah Monzani  
*Title Design:* Steve Frankfurt Communications, R/Greenberg Associates, Tony Silver Films  
*Titles:* Filmfex Animation Services  
*Music by:* Jerry Goldsmith  
*Conducted by:* Lionel Newman  
*Music Editor:* Bob Hathaway  
*Production Sound Mixer:* Derrick Leather

In 1977, a heavily revised script optioned by Twentieth Century-Fox entitled *Alien* went through the hands of several Hollywood directors. Peter Yates passed on it. Robert Aldrich passed on it. The veteran Jack Clayton, director of the brilliant ghost story *The Innocents* (1961), dismissed it as 'a stupid monster movie'. The Screen Directors Guild then went on strike. Eventually, the English director Ridley Scott was signed up in February 1978. Scott had a long track record in advertising but not so much experience in studio film production. He had released his first feature film, *The Duellists*, in 1977, which was not strongly promoted by Paramount. It had shown in precisely one cinema in Los Angeles.

When *Alien* opened in May 1979, with a saturation ad campaign, it was to lukewarm reactions. In *The New York Times*, Vincent Canby warned that it provided 'shocks of a most mundane kind' and called it 'an extremely small, rather decent movie of its modest kind, set inside a large, extremely fancy physical production'. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* praised only its 'commercial astuteness', complaining at its 'moribund' narrative which 'seems to dispense with dramatic structure altogether' and mourned its general 'lack of invention'. James Monaco in *Sight & Sound* thought it had little intellectual content and 'has no other reason for being except to work its effects on audiences'.

This is not a promising start for what became one of the most potent myths of modern cinema. *Alien* did in fact do well commercially: it was the fourth largest grossing film of 1979 (earning \$60 million in America). But texts give birth to myths once stories escape the bounds of their local plot and float free from their origins. Gothic fictions have done this continually across the centuries: Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* have each provided powerful icons, condensing something about what it means to be human in the modern world with such incredible economy and force that they broke their literary bonds and became embedded in the general culture. *Alien* undoubtedly has the same force as its Gothic forebears, bursting out of its modest origins and coiling itself around our darkest imaginings.

What was it in this creaky Old Dark House in Space, this interstellar slasher, that gave it the evolutionary advantage to survive the late-1970s glut of horror hybrids? The story of how *Alien* came together in the form it did is a series of glorious accidents, a chance result of arguments and compromises that would surely have wrecked a hundred other films. Cinema, like myth, rarely springs from a single intent, and *Alien* was moulded, at every level, by the forces of something collective, beyond itself, that pushed it into a shape that nevertheless felt instantly necessary and preordained.

For me, it is a boundary fiction, a film that rests on a number of cusps. These kinds of films do a lot of cultural work for us, negotiating limits and meanings. It is why we keep returning to them. *Alien* is a late-1970s studio film, given the green light by a studio keen to repeat the success of *Star Wars* (1977), yet it retains a late whiff of that independent spirit of the New Hollywood and even a dash of European art-house sensibility. An efficient thriller plot, honed by tough-guy director Walter Hill, was ornamented to baroque excess by the extraordinary concentration of artistic talents that came to work on the film. Low trappings came with high style.

After *Alien* it is difficult to recall how innovative was its appearance in the liminal zone between science fiction and Gothic horror. In 1980, the first serious

Re-recording Mixer: Bill Rowe  
Dolby Sound Consultant: Max Bell  
Re-recording Assistant: Ray Merrin  
Sound Editor: Jim Shields  
Dialogue Editor: Bryan Tilling  
Stunt Co-ordinator: Roy Scammell  
Stunt Work: Eddie Powell  
'Jones' Trained by: Animals Unlimited  
Studio: Shepperton Studios

Cast:

Tom Skerritt (*Captain Dallas*)  
Sigourney Weaver (*Ripley*)  
Veronica Cartwright (*Lambert*)  
Harry Dean Stanton (*Brett*)  
John Hurt (*Kane*)  
Ian Holm (*Ash*)  
Yaphet Kotto (*Parker*)  
Bolaji Badejo (*'Alien'*)  
Helen Horton (voice of *'Mother'*)

USA 1979©

116 mins

Digital 4K

\* Uncredited

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academic study of science-fiction cinema, Vivian Sobchack's *Screening Space*, struggled to parse the difference of these genres, recognising that there was 'a limbo of films between horror and science fiction', films featuring BEMs (Bug-Eyed Monsters) that were abjected as ridiculous by purists in both camps. For a long time, science-fiction criticism premised the virtues of the genre on it being scientific, cognitive, future-oriented and sublime, explicitly contrasting it against the lowly Gothic for being religious, over-emotional, tyrannised by the past, and always willing to pull the sublime down into the monstrous and grotesque. Science fiction deals with future possibilities, the Gothic with the dread inheritance of the past, the doom of repetition. But what happens when a film overthrows these conceptual oppositions and entirely fuses the genres? *Alien* offers a vision of an industrial future where the technological sublime is begrimed by the terrors of the deep ancestral past: this felt very new. It taunts the shiny NASA narrative of the Apollo missions in their dying days. It is the dark shadow of the science-fiction spectacular of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, creeping up behind it in the blockbuster charts of 1979 with new kinds of cinematic intensity and affect.

It is because of this location between genres that *Alien* launches its grand theme: an investigation of the boundaries of what it means to be human in a hostile universe teeming with other kinds of biological and artificial life. Anxious fantasies of origins and sexual reproduction are at the core of the film's horrific appeal, as they were in so many horror films of the 1970s. But *Alien's* science-fictional Gothic expands the palate from demon babies and toddler Antichrists, brooding more expansively on evolutionary time, the biological inheritances not just of the past but the monstrous possibilities of parallel alien development or future mutation. These threats hem in the human element in an uncertain zone in the spectrum of being. The fragile boundaries of the body will be menaced from within and without.

Of course, it is *that* scene, the birth of the alien, which exists like a post-traumatic flashback in our culture, tempting us back to revisit the horror again and again. The franchise chases this inaugural shock, hoping to tap its primal energy. But twists in the expectations of how gendered human beings act are also amongst the most interesting things about *Alien*: the abject male birthing, the feminisation of the hero, Ripley. This is not all: *Alien* actually offers a whole spectrum of beings, from the primordial creature they disturb on the asteroid to the computerised Mother that directs their every living breath, to the android that hides in their midst and computes actions to the dictates of an unseen, inhuman corporation. And this is to say nothing of the cunning role of Jones, the ship's cat.

If *Alien* is about the failure of community or co-existence with others (survival can be conceived only in terms of do-or-die), then this is because the film, shot in 1978 and released in 1979, is also on the cusp of utterly different eras. It was first given a limited release in late May 1979, only a matter of weeks after the election of Margaret Thatcher in Britain, and given a full release in November 1979 just as the Republican Ronald Reagan won the American presidential election. This was a moment of decisive shift from the economic and political crises of the 1970s to the rise of what would come to be known as neoliberalism. Although it cannot know this about itself, *Alien* registers this epochal shift with ominous portents.

Roger Luckhurst, *Alien* (BFI Film Classics, Palgrave Macmillan/Bloomsbury, 2014)