

## Document Citation

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# THE ABYSS *Film Journal* (PG-13)

(20TH CENTURY FOX)

Color/2.35/Dolby

140 Mins.

Cast: Ed Harris, Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio, Michael Biehn, Leo Burmester, Todd Graff, John Bedford Lloyd, J.C. Quinn, Kimberly Scott, Capt. Kidd Brewer, Jr. George Robert Klek, Christopher Murphy, Adam Nelson, Richard Warlock, Jimmie Ray Weeks, Chris Elliot.

Credits: Written and directed by James Cameron. Produced by Gale Anne Hurd. Director of photography: Mikael Salomon. Production designer: Leslie Dilley. Edited by Joel Goodman. Music by Alan Silvestri. Underwater director of photography and underwater unit supervisor: Al Giddings. Visual effects producer: Laura Buff. Visual effects supervisors: John Bruno; Hoyt Yeatman for Dream Quest Images; Dennis Muren for Industrial Light & Magic.

**Impressive underwater fantasy-adventure with a split personality, delivering director James Cameron's trademark action along with a dollop of Spielberg-like wonder. 89-139**

Writer-director James Cameron throws a little bit of everything into *The Abyss*—a sunken nuclear submarine, a collapsed oil rig, a crazed Navy lieutenant, an estranged couple rediscovering their love and, oh yes, an underwater colony of magical aliens. If that sounds like more than one film can handle, even at two hours and 20 minutes, you're right. *The Abyss* is spectacular and often super-charged, but it can't make up its mind whether it wants to be *Aliens* or *E.T.*

Too bad Cameron didn't go full throttle for another *Aliens*, since with that film he proved he's the most exciting and stylish maker of big-scale thrillers on the movie scene today. In both *Aliens* and *The Terminator*, Cameron played an exhilarating "Can I top this?" game with the audience, upping the ante of tension and terror in climaxes that never seemed to end. The filmmaker takes a new route in the final half-hour of *The Abyss*, diving south into a Spielbergian world of awe and wonder. Cameron handles these scenes of otherworldly communication and spiritual renewal deftly enough, but they're not what he does best. In any event, *Close Encounters* covered the same ground a decade ago: *The Abyss* leaves you with a feeling of deep blue *deja vu*.

But don't let these quibbles keep you away from Cameron's latest. From beginning to end, *The Abyss* is visually stunning, a moviemaking tour de force in which some 40 percent of the action was actually filmed underwater, in mammoth fresh-water tanks as much as 55 feet deep. The preponderance of footage in these watery depths transports you into another world, just as the director surely intended. To get there, Cameron has conjured an elaborate storyline involving the mysterious crippling of a nuclear submarine containing 192 warheads 2,000 feet below the ocean's surface. The crew of an experimental underwater oil-drilling habitat is recruited to join a rescue mission headed by Navy Lieutenant Coffey, who quickly begins to show the symptoms of HPNS (High Pressure Nervous Syndrome), a sort of deep-water mental breakdown. Add to the mix the ongoing bickering between Bud Brigman, the rig foreman, and his estranged wife Lindsey, the project engineer—plus a raging hurricane and rumors of Soviet hanky panky above and those strange, glowing creatures below.

Cameron's swirl of plot elements allows him several opportunities to create some nail-biting action. Best of these is the moment when the hurricane sends several tons of oil-rigging debris raining down on the habitat below; Cameron choreographs this kind of death-defying chaos with feverish style. The director also gets great results from the casting of *Terminator* and *Aliens* hero Michael Biehn in the live-wire role of Coffey, who takes Red Menace paranoia to its farthest extreme. (Biehn gets the movie's choicest line after the Jello-y alien is discovered inside the habitat: "It went straight for the warhead and *they* think it's cute!") The more sweaty and manic he gets, the more Biehn



Ed Harris & Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio in *The Abyss*

energizes the film.

Once Biehn is out of the picture, *The Abyss* becomes unabashedly romantic, as Bud and Lindsey find their love renewed by the prospect of imminent death. Cameron's ode to the marital bond is strange emotional territory for an action director, especially in light of his reported breakup with his wife and longtime collaborator, producer Gale Anne Hurd. The gushiness is minimized, fortunately, by the exceptionally strong performances of Ed Harris and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio as the battling but loving Bud and Lindsey.

*The Abyss* is like a near-bottomless pit of movie ingredients. If you're looking for hard-edged thrills, misty-eyed romance or cheerful fantasy, you'll find it. You just have to wait your turn.

—Kevin Lally