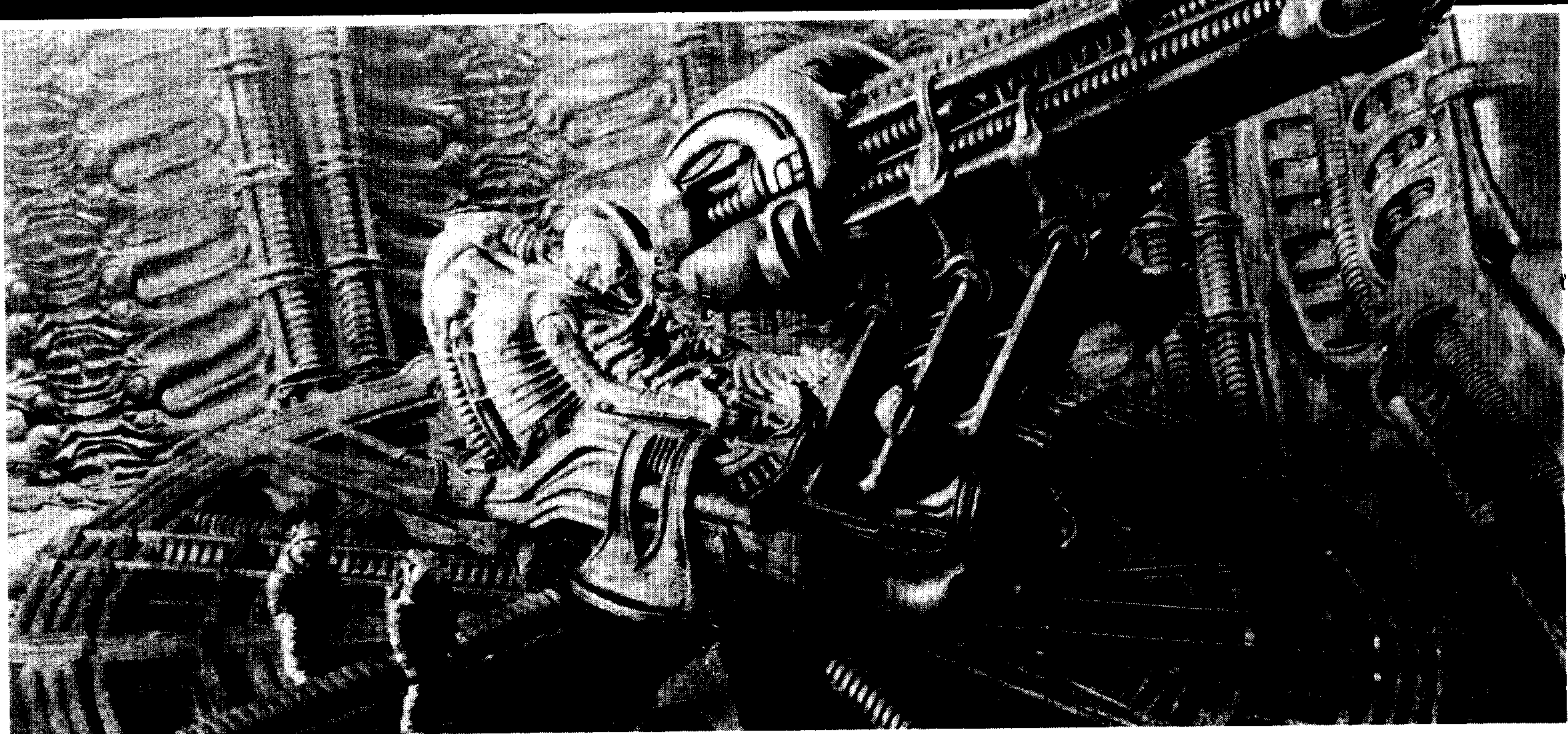


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# FILM

**Alien stays within the horror tradition, returning to the basic plot of *The Thing* and decorating it with a visual style gleaned from 2001.**



The alien cockpit: part penis, part tuba, part exhaust pipe

## Things to Come

Noel Carroll

**Alien**  
Loews New York Twin and  
selected local theaters

Though Georges Méliès' curious blends of technology and magic (e.g., *Trip to the Moon*) are among the earliest and most important examples of fiction film, science fiction as a distinct movie genre did not blossom until the '50s. Spectacles like *Metropolis*, *Woman in the Moon* and *Things to Come* were isolated experiments rather than parts of discernible cycles. World War II created a broad interest in technology and research that laid the foundation for wide audience curiosity in quasi-scientific themes, while the 1947 flying-saucer scare (perhaps also prompted by the war, which raised the specter of aerial invasion) signaled the melodramatic possibilities latent in popular science.

Connoisseurs of literary science fiction look with disdain on their celluloid siblings. They argue that science fiction in film has evolved as a sub-genre of the horror film in that it is predominantly concerned with imaginary beings and monsters to the exclusion of the grander pursuits of futurology. The turn toward horror came very early in the emergence of the sci-fi genre. Titles like *Destination Moon*, a didactic essay on the possible technology of space travel, gave way to *The Thing*, an adventure in which an eight-foot-tall bloodsucking carrot, played by James Arness, visits earth with a tropism for world conquest. *Alien*, the best of the recent crop of science fiction, stays within the horror tradition, returning to the basic plot of *The Thing* and decorating it with a visual style gleaned from 2001. In *The Thing*, the affectless brainy vegetable served as a metaphor for Communism. But like the new *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Alien* downplays politics for ecology — the creature at one point becomes a carnivorous tapeworm with the head of a porpoise that chews its way through its host's torso.

The crew of a gigantic, interstellar fuel tanker, The Nostromo, sleeps in suspended animation while the ship's computer, "Mother," guides the barge back home. The ferry looks like a colossal offshore pumping station. It rolls over the camera interminably — a mandatory illusion in almost every contemporary space saga — in order to communicate its scale. Inside, the camera pans through the dark corridors of the craft, a reticulum of pipes and wires that evokes memories of old factories in contrast to the white, modernist quarters where the crew dozes in bunks arrayed like a giant flower. Mother awakens the crew to answer what might be an intergalactic SOS; the hoods of the sleeping capsules spring open like petals blooming.

The crew is commanded by Dallas (Tom Skerritt) and Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), who resemble Kris Kristofferson and Jane Fonda, respectively. These space travelers, including Kane (John Hurt) and Parker (Yaphet Kotto), are not the glorified astronauts we are accustomed to; they are the average working people of the future, arguing among themselves about pay rates.

The shuttle ship disembarks towards a wintry asteroid to answer the SOS. In the style of 2001, the cruiser is a tiny glint of light against huge planetary orbs. The landing is also reminiscent of Kubrick — cross-cutting between a panel of computer monitors (schematizing the terrain below) and long shots that present an external view of the approach and touchdown. The contrasts between inside and outside, abstraction and detail, are exhilarating, as is the sense of anticipation the cross-cutting engenders. The major deviation from Kubrick is that director Ridley Scott (*The Duellists* and innumerable TV commercials) emphasizes the weight of the descending ship as it crushes veritable boulders, whereas 2001 is all about weightlessness. The scene is stunning; hopefully it will lead other filmmakers to

look to Kubrick's treasury of special effects instead of repetitiously plundering *Star Wars*.

The rescue party alights onto a blue, wind-swept landscape beset with a blizzard three times more torrential than the one in *The Thing*. Several long shots establish how miniscule these space explorers are, visually articulating the recurring sci-fi theme of the contingency of human life. Finally, the alien ship is located.

Designed by Swiss surrealist H.R. Giger, it is a wonder of biomorphism. From the outside it suggests a bow-legged mummy with strong funereal overtones. Inside, the vaulted walls are spectacularly ribbed so that the spacemen look as though they've descended into the belly of a whale. The image of being inside the alien's "body" is diabolically reversed later when the alien literally inhabits Kane's body, enriching the themes of parasites and disease that the film exploits throughout.

Like so much science fiction, *Alien* is an exercise in architecture-as-painting where the vagueness of the function of futuristic machines and habitats permits the free play of the designer's plastic imagination and taste for symbolism. The alien ship is cavernous and this, along with the ribbing, insinuates the sense of a Gothic cathedral replete with connotations of great age (a perennially threatening, Oedipally derived feature of horror fiction) as well as medieval mystery and menace. The controls of the ship are mounted on something that looks like a condensation of a tuba and a penis with exhaust pipes that is slanted at a 45-degree angle and is roughly the size of a house. Scott stresses monumental scale throughout the first part of the film to contrast with the increasing claustrophobia of what follows.

The explorers discover an alien hatchery; one egg opens and a creature, a protoplasmic glob of Silly Putty about the heft of a softball, snaps itself like an out-sized rubber band onto Kane's face. Against Ripley's better judgment, the wounded explorer-cum-alien is brought onto the ship. All hell breaks loose in a

series of predictable but lively plot turns until only Ripley — a positive feminist role model *a la* Hollywood — remains to confront the beast (who, by the way, grows at a fantastic rate, only slightly slower than the one in *20 Million Miles to Earth*, and changes shape after the fashion of *Godzilla versus the Smog Monster*).

Once the monster is onboard, the pace of the film shifts from the slow visual description of the opening (which seduced me completely) to the tense rhythm of search and destroy or be destroyed. The creature gains control of the airshaft and has access to every corner of the ship. The science officer, like Carrington in *The Thing*, helps the alien, admiring its perfection (and lack of emotions), which he says is matched only by its hostility. The monster is omnipresent, cornering the crew in enclosed spaces. The basic anxiety the film indulges is of being surrounded with no avenue of escape.

The generic theme of this sort of movie is survival. In this context, the creature represents an ingenious piece of symbol-making. It is a master of survival, changing its structure as the situation demands — becoming a crab to hold onto Kane's face, adopting the tubular shape of a fish to navigate his gullet and finally metamorphosing from small to large into a green tentacled biped that stalks the ship's corridor and camouflages itself easily among the pipes and wires. Its head is, ironically, like the weight on an oil rig and its slavering, comic-book maw extends from its face as if on an arm. Scott shoots the beast in short takes, darkly lit or under strobe lights, increasing our terror by generally providing only swift glimpses of its black, suggestive outline or its more horrific parts.

Though ultimately on the side of the monsters, *Alien* concentrates not only on fantastic biologies but also on such major sci-fi preoccupations as space travel and architecture. The care lavished on the more visual aspects of the genre undoubtedly are attributable to Scott's special penchant for composition. Most recent science fiction has disappointed me, but *Alien* encourages me to look forward to things to come.