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Tom Skerritt as Dallas in *Alien*, the first astronaut in an old shlock horror movie.

# Gross Encounters

By Tom Allen *VOICE* MAY 23 1979

**ALIEN** Directed by Ridley Scott. Written by Dan O'Bannon from a story by O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett. Produced by Gordon Carroll, David Giler, and Walter Hill. Released by Twentieth Century-Fox.

The *Nostromo*, the special-effects centerpiece of Ridley Scott's *Alien*, is an outer-space industrial tanker returning to earth with 20 million tons of mineral ore. This ship is clearly a wonder of the future. It defies the laws of nature by carrying its own normal gravity. The vast complex, whose silos resemble a floating Three Mile Island plant, is fully oxygenated, an extravagance on a par with aromatizing the New York City subway system with Chanel No. 5. The cargo is still computed in tons, not the metric system. It is in such details that, despite the elaborate futuristic verismo, *Alien* falls short of investigative projections like *2001*. *Alien*, indeed, is sloppy science fiction; it is not intellectually concerned with how the future will work.

The point is important, because part of the movie's appeal on the sci-fi grapevine will be that it is ostensibly the first adult film to challenge the white, antiseptic, inexorably logical living spaces of *2001*. Screenwriter and visual designer Dan O'Bannon, however, has picked up where he left off on *Dark Star*, the pulp graduate project he made with John Carpenter at USC. The *Nostromo* looks like a beat-up piece of junk; its dark passageways resemble the greasy corridors of a tramp steamer. The blue-collar crew of five men and two women are company drones more interested in a good cup of coffee and union grievances than in the star systems outside the portholes. To them, the first alien signal encountered by humanity is grist for mercenary debate on how their shares will be affected by the appropriate contract codicils.

The affable Tom Skerritt leads the crew as Captain Dallas. Harry Dean Stanton, in a tacky Hawaiian sports shirt, and Yaphet Kotto, in filthy overalls, contribute deadpan red-neck humor as basement engineers. Ian Holm as the science advisor models his role after Yul Brynner's Model 404 android in *Westworld*. The perilously anemic John Hurt as the first mate who carries the alien aboard has a brief, gruesome bit that aficionados of stomach-churning will rank with the tongue-biting scene in *Midnight Express*. Veronica Cartwright as navigator turns up in a movie that roots even more vigorously for pod forms than her previous film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; and newcomer Sigourney Weaver, a six-foot version of Jane Fonda, is the only crewmember with a modicum of common-sense survival. None of these characters is particularly interesting, and they all die in a disgraceful, off-handed fashion as the movie extracts from them its pound of flesh.

## FILM

This crew deserves their alien. The movie's close encounter of the sordid kind regresses science fiction to the level of *The Green Slime*. The creature is discovered on an unnamed planet in a contraption that is either a downed mother ship or an incubator. The alien has successive life forms: a bloblike fetus in a squishy pod, a squidlike parasite that attaches to the face, a wormlike carnivore that resembles the disgusting stomach dwellers of David Cronenberg's *They Came From Within* and *Rabid* (the two '70s movies that most resemble *Alien*), and an upright stalker. I think it's humanoid in shape, with a grasshopper head, octopuslike tentacles, and a lizard's tale. I really don't know, or care. Only enough of the beast is shown to indicate it's chewing through a crew member's chest.

When you strip away the expensive special effects and elaborate paraphernalia, *Alien* has nothing on its mind other than launching an Old Dark House in space. But there's an immense difference. The Dolby Stereo sound, the 70mm print, and the astronomical cost of space-age special effects for which corporate heads roll are not the products of an innocent age. *Alien*, in fact, is *The Deer Hunter* of modern sci-fi films. It obfuscates character, lolls indulgently over the irrelevant, strenuously avoids enlightenment or inspiration, and relentlessly zeros in on the mechanics of brutalization. Instead of Russian roulette in close-up, the movie substitutes attacks by the alien. The weapons of torture are jiggly, hand-held cameras, strobelike effects, and murky montages that conceal everything but a glimpse of the killing. But these visuals—lifted from the vocabulary of cheap shlock horror—are irrelevant. The true bullying occurs on the soundtrack in the form of stentorian breathing, strident screams, ear-splitting intercom announcements, and the creaks and groans of massive machinery at one's elbow.

*Alien* applies all the latest advancements in cinema technology to induce mindless anxiety. Professionally, I'm fascinated by how it will perform at the box office; although it's the worst kind of trash its excesses approach the total-environment assault of *Midnight Express*, *Halloween*, and *Dawn of the Dead*. Personally, I'd rather be strapped down in a sense-deprivation chamber in Uruguay than be exposed to *Alien* again. Any critic who recommends this one is saying, in effect, This way to the black box, ladies and gentlemen. ■