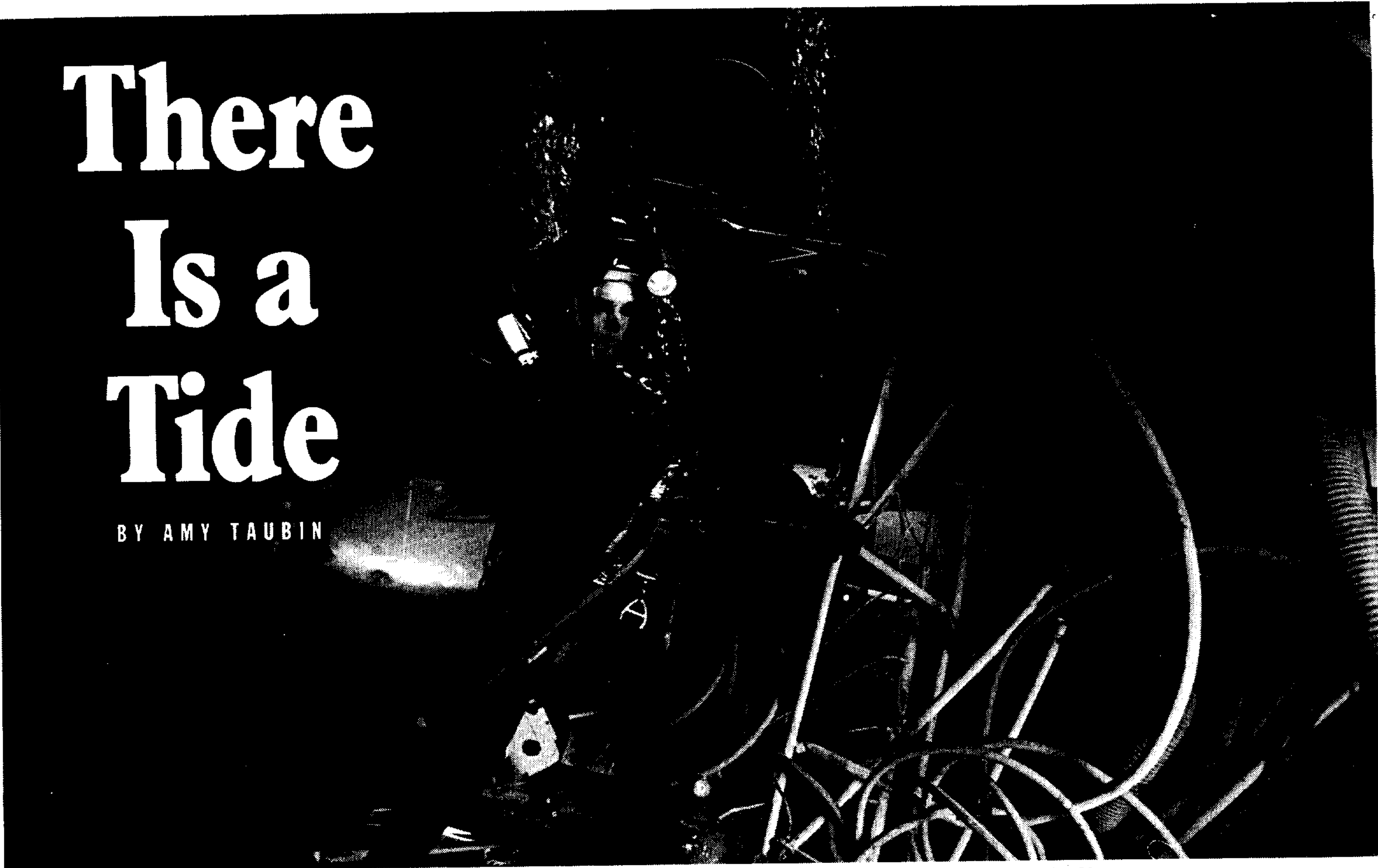


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There Is a Tide

BY AMY TAUBIN



Cameron's world: Lindsey Brigman (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) walks on the ocean floor in *The Abyss*.

THE ABYSS. Directed and written by James Cameron. Produced by Gale Anne Hurd. Released by Twentieth Century-Fox.

LOCK UP. Directed by John Flynn. Written by Richard Smith, Jeb Stuart, and Henry Rosenbaum. Produced by Lawrence Gordon and Charles Gordon. Presented by White Eagle Enterprises/Carolco. Released by Tri-Star.

The *Abyss* is a very likable \$43 million movie (low-end estimate). As an experience, it's a bit like two hours in a bumper car with a special someone—you get shook up and adrenalized, but the risks are pretty minimal. An action-adventure love story in a setting that's both fresh and suitable to 70mm (40 per cent of the film was actually shot under water), this high-tech wet dream tries its best to follow the guidelines for a mega-hit. And since it's the first studio epic since *Aliens* (also directed and written by James Cameron) with a woman character who's more than a sidekick or a send-up, I wish it the very best.

Set in the imminent future, *The Abyss* features underwater technology so advanced it might as well be sci-fi. The basic interiors—an underwater oil drilling facility nicknamed Deepcore and its smaller satellite submersibles—correspond to outer-space crafts except in one important particular. Rather than (supposedly) gliding through space, thus providing a stable frame for the image, the submersibles rock 'n' roll in the water. Their movement adds an extra dimension to Cameron's habitually hyperactive camerawork. Kinetic impact and visual excitement compensate for the low level of suspense and lack of dramatic conflict.

In part, *The Abyss* is about a marriage (although that's probably not the reason Cameron favors something old, something new, a lot of borrowing, and the Big Blue). Virgil "Bud" Brigman (Ed Harris) is the foreman of Deepcore; his wife, Lindsey (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), is its chief engineer. When an American nuclear submarine runs aground on an underwater reef at the edge of the Cayman Trough, a two-and-a-half-mile abyss in the Atlantic, the navy enlists Deepcore

in a search-and-rescue mission. The ambitious Lindsey is all too willing, but Bud fears for the safety of his crew. "Virgil, you weiner," she scoffs, "you never could stand up to a fight." "God, I hate that bitch," he mutters. "I probably never should have married her." Shortly after, Bud throws his wedding ring down the chemical toilet, instantly repents, and has to stick his hand in the yucky blue—um, abyss—to get it out. Cameron wants us to believe this marriage, like the nuclear sub, is on the rocks and ready to explode, but it's obvious from the first that these two are extremely well-matched. They just have a combative style.

With Bud and Lindsey basically on the same side, Cameron has to rely on some shopworn devices to get things going. The very paranoid Lieutenant Coffey (Michael Biehn), head of the navy SEAL team involved in the operation, suspects that the Soviets have sabotaged the sub and wants to nuke them out of the water. Since Cuba is less than 100 miles away, this could become another Bay of Pigs. Then Hurricane Fred knocks out communication with the surface and leaves Deepcore itself disabled, with only enough fuel and air for 12 hours.

After this plausible, if overblown, opening, Lindsey goes down to investigate the sub and has a close encounter with something "better than a UFO, a nonterrestrial intelligence." As you may have observed in the TV trailers, the NTIs look like big, transparent, pink-and-blue flying fish. Tucked between their fins are tiny E.T.-like heads, and they trail their attenuated E.T.-like fingers in the H₂O. When Lindsey sees them, her eyes light up with childlike wonder. (Mastrantonio is extremely good at this.) Cameron spends about three minutes fooling around with the notion that NTIs mirror the inner state of whoever's around (i.e., they have both creative and destructive potential), then drops it. With the "queen bee" gushing about how the NTI was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, there's no doubt we're drifting toward Spielbergia.

To put it gently, the script is a run-of-the-mill patchwork. It wants to have it all ways—to be both a children's and an

adult movie, a nonthreatening, life-affirming, special-effects fantasy, and a hi-tech noir. Cameron conceives the abyss as a metaphoric as well as a geological space. But the film is nonstop action; its notion of subjectivity, of the dark recesses of the psyche, is purely aerobic. Lindsey and Bud overcome their differences (ostensibly a class issue—she's management, he's labor) because they both exhibit enormous courage under extraordinary physical circumstances. They risk drowning and are thereby reborn. Lindsey's second coming has overtones of Tinker Bell's in *Peter Pan*. Bud is less fortunate in that he has to go through a deep sea version of the 2001 Stargate

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sequence (Kubrick's *Waterloo*). Given 20 years of development in computer animation, what's amazing is that infinity still looks like an infrared aerial shot of the Santa Monica Freeway.

Like *Batman*, *The Abyss* is nothing if not a set. Cameron didn't shoot in the open sea. He converted two tanks in an abandoned nuclear reactor into underwater sound stages, flooded them with seven and a half million and two million gallons of water respectively, and lit them with state-of-the-art HMI lights converted for underwater photography. But where the *Batman* set, after its initial presentation, recedes into mere background, Cameron's set dynamically defines the action. On a visual and technical level, as a tour de force of one seemingly impossible and never-before-realized shot after another, about 20 per cent of *The Abyss* is brilliantly inventive filmmaking. Cameron sends the camera careening down corridors that are too narrow for a Steadicam and have to be lit with fiber-optic tubes, because there's no place to hide regular movie lights. Even more remarkable than the image is the quality of the sound—not postdubbed but recorded live underwater, so that the actors' voices are the direct expression of their moment-by-moment physical situation. Mastrantonio and Harris give not only energetic but at

times emotionally compelling performances. The argument between them is whether Lindsey, like Millamant in Congreve's *The Way of the World*, will consent "to dwindle into a wife." And it's revealing that although the word *wife* gets batted around (it even comes up on the screen in giant letters at the climax), the word *husband* is never mentioned.

An expert action director, Cameron is much too good at covering his tracks—directing the audience's attention to what's supposed to be happening as opposed to how it actually gets on the screen. If this is a film about redemption through endurance, then a shot of Cameron—hanging from a rope, half submerged in the water with an oxygen tube up his nose, decompressing after five hours of underwater shooting—would reveal more about this brand of megalomania than anything in the actual film. (My advice—read the location stories before you buy your ticket.)

In the end, the operative myth in *The Abyss* is about distinguishing oneself as a director (as opposed to strengthening a marriage or saving the world). For all its gritty stylistics, the film has almost no psychological or social resonance; it's relevant only to other blockbusters. (Because Cameron treats women and men as equals, and locates villainy squarely in the military, he comes out to the left of most mainstream product.) A technical and financial groundbreaker, *The Abyss* is no deeper than its surface.