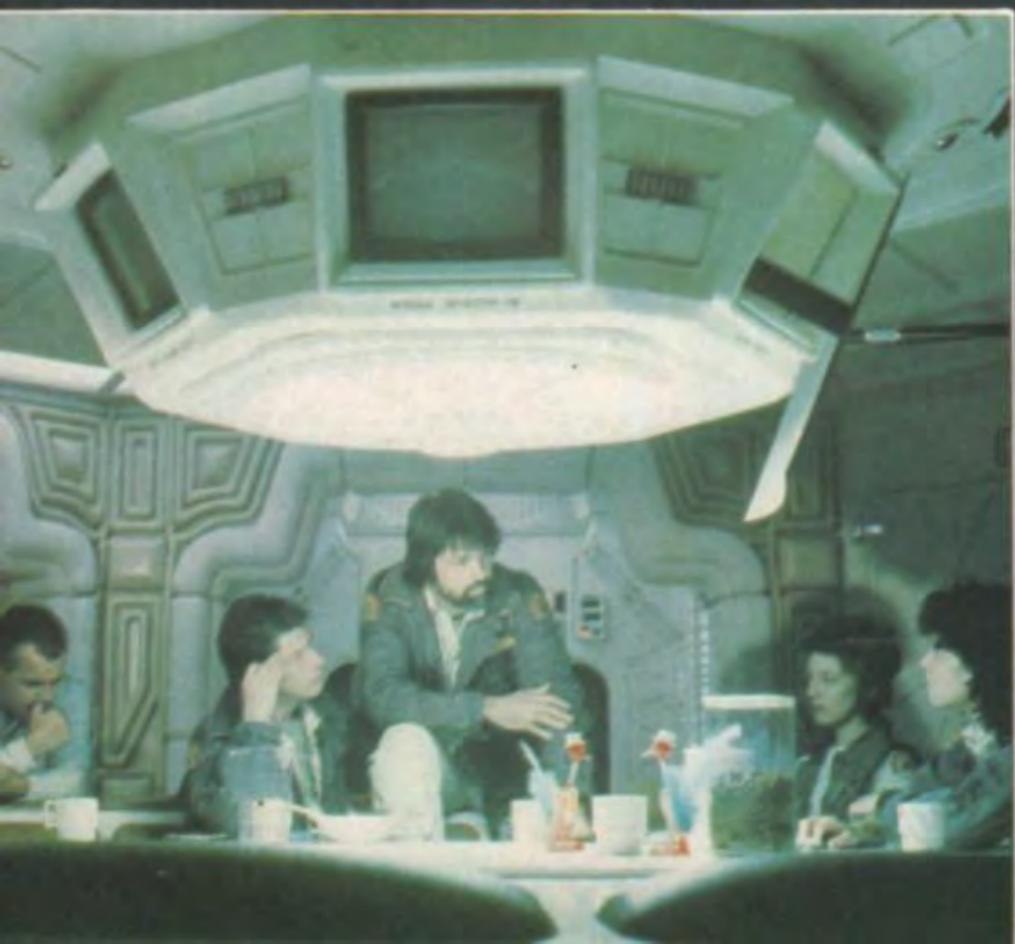


# A L I E N



After looking at the making of the film last month, *Starburst* presents a review by author John Brosnan who asks why film-makers tend to look to past movies for inspiration for their new projects.



**A**lien is a very annoying film, because on one level it is a masterpiece and on another it's a botched job. Or to put it another way – as a science fiction film it's seriously flawed, but as a horror film it works perfectly. But then the two genres, though they have been intertwined since the beginning of the cinema, have rarely been successfully reconciled. However one can't help wishing that the gap had been closed a little more than it is in *Alien*.

Dan O'Bannon, the originator of *Alien*, obviously grew up on the sf/horror films of the 1950s, as was evident from his first film, *Dark Star*, co-scripted with director John Carpenter. For just as *Star Wars* is an amalgam of a wide variety of George Lucas's favourite movie influences, *Alien* includes references to such films as *The Thing*, *The Quatermass Xperiment*, *Twenty Million Miles to Earth* and, in particular, *It! The Terror from Beyond Space*. The latter movie also concerned a spaceship that is invaded by an alien monster and, like the one in *Alien*, it infiltrates



the ventilation system and picks off the crew one by one. Eventually the surviving crew members retreat to the nose-cone of the ship where they have the bright idea of donning space suits and letting the air out – a procedure that successfully destroys the creature just as he smashes his way through the last hatch cover. I don't want to reveal the ending of *Alien* for anyone who hasn't seen it but I will

Opposite above: *The three astronauts (John Hurt, Veronica Cartwright and Tom Skerritt) approach the alien spaceship, which they believe to be the source of the distress call.* Opposite inset: *The crew of the Nostromo awaken from hyper-sleep.* Opposite below left: *Dallas (Tom Skerritt, standing) discusses the ship's position with the rest of the crew.* Opposite below right: *Kane (John Hurt) struggles in agony with the horrible after-effects of his infection by the alien parasite.* Above: *Kane and Dallas gaze in awe at the huge alien ship they discover on the planet's surface.* Left: *Veronica Cartwright plays the navigator of the Nostromo, Lambert.*

say there is a similarity of events here as well.

The main difference between *It!* and *Alien* is a big one – at least ten million dollars. Whereas *It!* and most of the sf/horror movies made during the 1950s were low budget “B” productions *Alien* receives the full “A” treatment with a huge budget, lavish sets, top-quality special effects, a good director and an excellent cast. However, though the rich surface trappings make it all *seem* new and original, underneath there is a 1950s “B” film struggling to get out – one that contains all the faults of that specific genre.

For instance, the excellent cast is wasted because, as usual in this type of film, there isn't much for them to do except react to the film's *real* stars – the sets and the special effects. And when they do get the chance to say something the “B” film script gives them lines like:

***Alien* could have the world's worst actors and still be much the same.**

“Let's get outta here . . . this place gives me the creeps.” In reality you could put the world's worst actors in *Alien* and the result would be much the same because the characters are not required to be anything more than one-dimensional figures. (Of course the 1950s sf/horror movies often *did* feature the world's worst actors!) Having said that I must admit I would miss the presence of Sigourney Weaver in *Alien* – she succeeds in making an impression despite being smothered by the production values along with the rest of the cast.

But where *Alien* most reveals its “B” film origins is in the plot which is so full of holes it completely collapses once you start thinking about it. It is also needlessly confusing due to changes and deletions that have been made to the original script. For instance, the space ship *Nostromo* makes an unscheduled stop at a remote planet to answer an apparent distress call. The crew then find a crashed alien spaceship beneath which is a huge cavern containing the mysterious eggs that later cause all the trouble. The suggestion here is that the eggs arrived on the planet in the alien ship. Yet the original script reveals that the eggs are part of a genetic engineering experiment being carried out by the same Earth company that employs the crew of the *Nostromo*. The company is illegally involved in a project to create a perfect killing machine – the “alien” of the title. Unknown to the crew

**The crew of the *Nostromo* are merely expendable guinea pigs.**

of the *Nostromo* the ship has been programmed to pick up one of the eggs, activate it and return the resulting creature to company headquarters. The crew themselves are merely expendable guinea pigs being used to see just how effective the company's deadly creation is. But the crew, or some of them, learn the truth when they discover that one of their number is actually a robot working under the direct orders of the company.

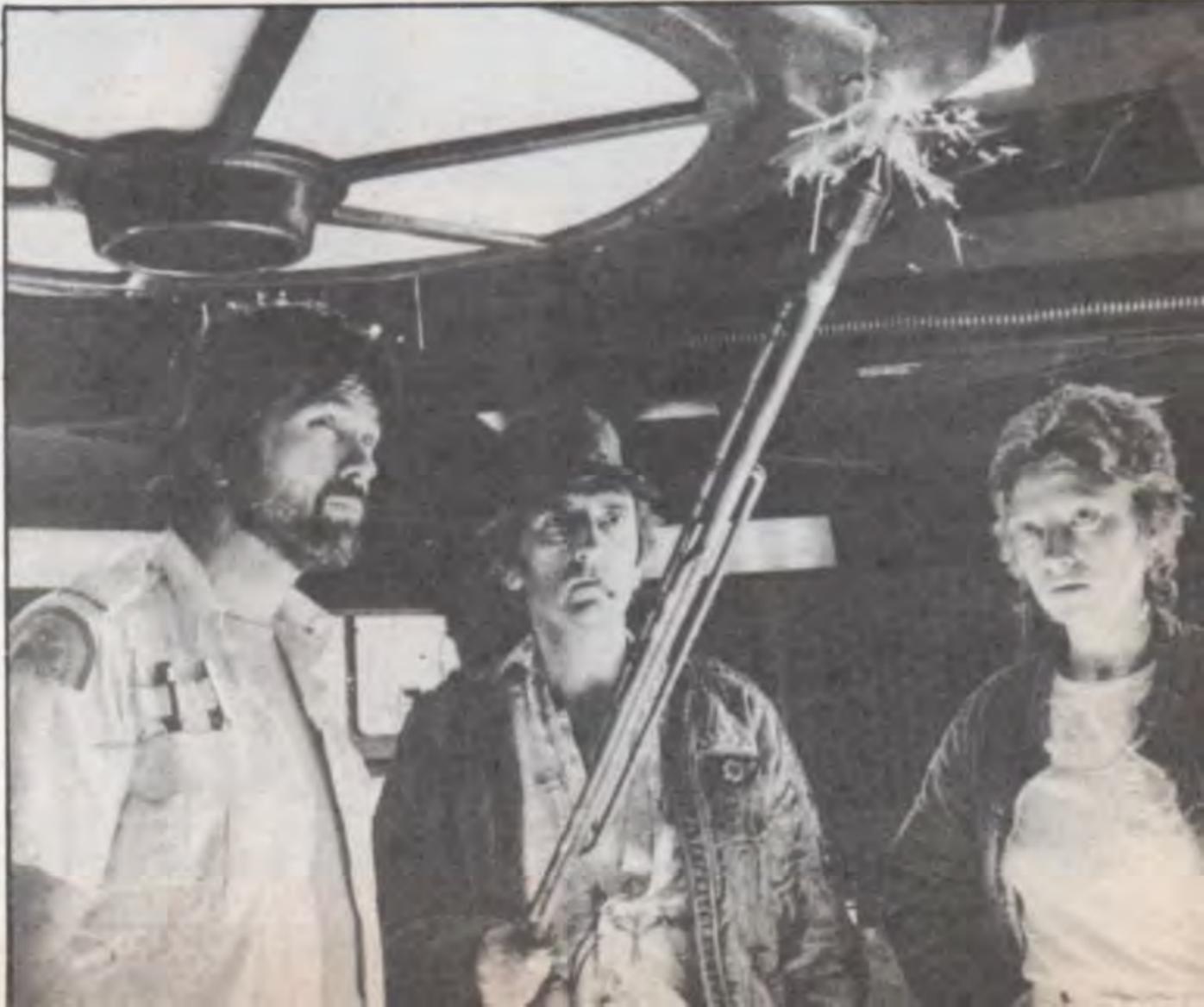
In the film one of the crew is found to be a robot too but in the original screenplay the company's involvement is not explained – only that he has been ordered to bring back the alien at any cost. The question this raises is that if the “alien” is a genuine alien and not the creation of the company, how did the company know of its existence? And if the

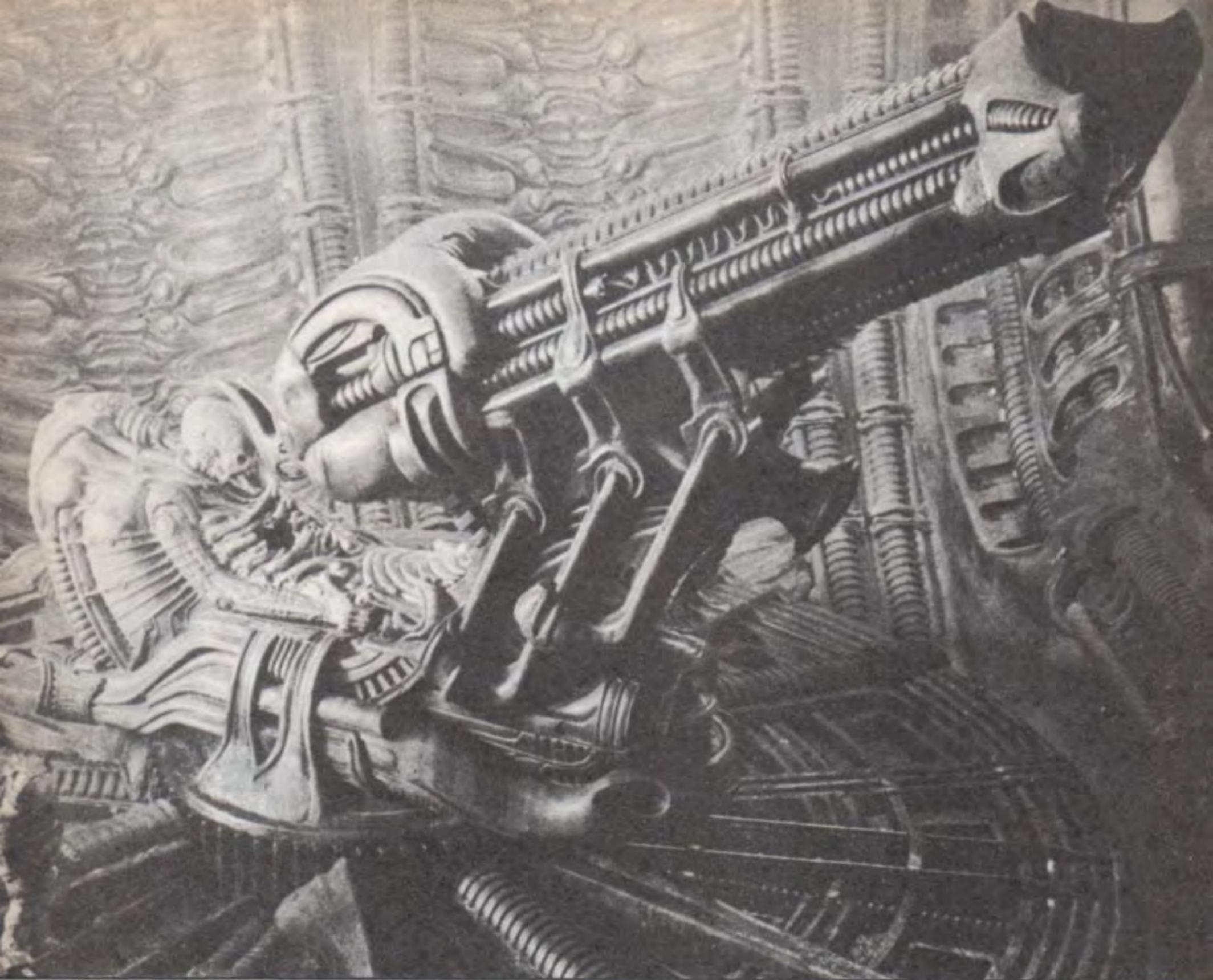
eggs are from the alien spaceship why do the remains of the dead alien in the ship bear little resemblance to the thing that hatches out of the egg? Or is the crashed alien space ship nothing to do with the eggs but another casualty of the company's custom-built monsters, its crew lured to its doom by the fake distress signal? If so, isn't this too much of a coincidence? I don't know, I just got very confused trying to work it all out.

Another deletion from the original script is the sequence where one of the crew members, Ripley (*Sigourney Weaver*), finds the bodies of two of the missing men hidden in the ventilation shaft. They are encased in cocoons and are being used by the creature as living incubators for the eggs it has implanted within them. One of the men, the Captain (*Tom Skerritt*) is still conscious and pleads with Ripley to kill him before the alien returns. She obliges by turning her flame thrower on both the cocoons, destroying them. Actually this sequence was shot but later cut out by director Ridley Scott because he thought it slowed down the pace of the film. This may have been the case but the loss of that sequence weakens the plot seriously because now audiences don't realize there is a *purpose* to the alien's extremely anti-social behaviour – he needs to attach humans in order to reproduce and ensure the survival of his species.

There are other flaws in the logical development of the plot and the scientific inaccuracies that one has come to expect in sf films these days abound. For instance, we hear sounds in space and also see a space ship being buffeted presumably by the shockwave created by a distant explosion when, of course, there is no

Above right: *The Nostromo* search party stumbles across the fossilised remains of a giant, insect-like creature at the controls of a bizarre cannon. Below left: Brett (Harry Dean Stanton) demonstrates his super-charged “cattle prod”, with which he aims to drive the *Alien* into a net, to Dallas (Tom Skerritt) and Lambert (Veronica Cartwright). Below right: An atmospheric character study of Tom Skerritt as Dallas, Captain of the *Nostromo*.





way that a shock wave can travel through a vacuum. And as usual the problem of the lack of gravity in space is completely ignored – everyone walks around and generally behaves as if the spaceship was parked somewhere on Earth. There's not even a mention of that old gimmick used by sf writers – "artificial gravity". It may be an impossibility but at least it shows that someone is aware that conditions in outer space are rather different from those on Earth. It seems that all the pioneering work done by Stanley Kubrick in making a space film, *2001*, that was scientifically accurate

**Dan O'Bannon is not too happy at the changes made to his script.**

has been forgotten by today's new film makers. Nor do audiences seem to care either, yet this sort of thing is the equivalent of someone making a western, set in 1850, which shows all the cowboys driving around on motor bikes.

Dan O'Bannon himself is aware of this problem and is apparently not too happy about the changes made to his original script. "My story has been rewritten twice now, first by Walter Hill and then by David Giler . . . when Hill came in to work on the script he said to me, 'My strength is that I don't know anything about science fiction.' I never understood what he meant by that. It makes me nervous,



though. These people literally go back to step one, ignoring all that has happened in sf literature since the thirties. They are making the same mistakes that sf writers were making decades ago. If all you know about science fiction is *Star Wars* then all you can possibly do is rewrite *Star Wars*."

Okay, that's *Alien* considered as science fiction but it is as a pure horror film that one should really examine it, and as a pure horror film it is almost a complete success. Like all the best horror movies it creates the atmosphere of the personal nightmare, a mood that is

**The Alien resembles at times a giant, distorted human foetus.**

visually sustained by the bizarre, oppressive sets designed by Michael Seymour and based on the artwork of H. R. Giger and Ron Cobb. There's an unsettling *organic* appearance to the whole film which contributes strongly to the nightmarish feeling. The exterior of the alien spaceship resembles the pincer of a giant crab and the entrances look like huge orifices leading into some vast animal. The interior of the ship and the cave below it containing the eggs also create a strong impression of organic decay and even the interior of the *Nostramo* is a labyrinth of claustrophobic tubular tunnels that suggests the humans are trapped within



some larger creature.

The alien itself, designed by H. R. Giger, at times resembles some giant, distorted human foetus (one with chrome steel teeth) and this foetal imagery is reinforced by the monster's first appearance – erupting out of John Hurt's stomach in a grotesque travesty of human birth that is even preceded by the agonising equivalent of labour pains (not a film to see on a full stomach). The monster is wisely only revealed in a series of brief glimpses, except at the end where we see perhaps too much of it in long shot. Particularly effective, however, are the close-ups of its "face" – unlike most movie aliens this one really does appear *alien* because its physiognomy has been cunningly



Top: *The Nostromo* search party approaches the entrance of the derelict alien ship. Above: Ship's captain, Dallas (Tom Skerritt), takes a closer look at the fossilised creature aboard the wrecked ship.

**Director Ridley Scott builds-up suspense with impeccable skill.**

designed to offer no familiar feature at all (it has no eyes, for instance). By the time one has tried to work out *what* one is looking at on the screen there is no time left to look for defects.

Director Ridley Scott and Editor Terry Rawlings handle the buildup of tension and suspense with impeccable skill, pacing the shock effects at a steadily increasing rate. Finally it is a continuous barrage of light and sound battering the audience as the lone survivor in the film attempts to elude the monster and get out of the ship before it self-destructs. This is followed by a deceptive period of calm that culminates in a final kick to the nervous system which works even though it is expected. I certainly left the cinema feeling somewhat weak at the knees, a nostalgic reminder of how I used to feel after watching a good horror movie back in the 1950s when I was still growing up. Perhaps the weak knees were only a symptom of old age but I prefer to regard them as an indication of the film's effectiveness.

The only thing that worries me about *Alien* is that I fear it will lead to the inevitable flood of inferior imitations just as *Star Wars* led to *Battlestar Galactica*, *Humanoid*, *Buck*

**Rogers and Shape of Things to Come.** That would create the danger of the science fiction cinema going in the same direction it did in the 1950s when the genre was almost killed off by the hordes of increasingly sleazy,

cheap and shoddy monster movies. I have a terrible suspicion that people like Roger Corman, Herman Cohen and Bert I. Gordon, not to mention Irwin Allen, are working on their versions of *Alien* at this very moment.

**Alien (1979)**

Tom Skerritt (*as Dallas*), Sigourney Weaver (*Ripley*), Veronica Cartwright (*Lambert*), Harry Dean Stanton (*Brett*), John Hurt (*Kane*), Ian Holm (*Ash*), Yaphet Kotto (*Parker*), Bolaji Badejo (*The Alien*).

Directed by Ridley Scott. Screenplay by Dan O'Bannon, Edited by Terry Rawlings, Director of photography Derek Van Lint, Production designer Michael Seymour, Art directors Les Dilley and Roger Christian,

Alien design by H. R. Giger, Alien head effects by Carlo Rambaldi, Special effects supervised by Brian Johnson and Nick Alder, Concept artists Ron Cobb, Jean Giraud and Chris Foss, Small alien forms by Roger Dicken, Music by Jerry Goldsmith, Produced by Gordon Carroll, David Giler and Walter Hill, Executive producer Ronald Shusett. Released by Twentieth Century-Fox.

Time: 116 mins

Cert: X

# A L I E N



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## A L I E N (X)

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HARRY DEAN STANTON and YAPHET KOTTO <sup>AS</sup> PARKER

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER RONALD SHUSETT PRODUCED BY GORDON CARROLL, DAVID GILER and WALTER HILL DIRECTED BY RIDLEY SCOTT  
STORY BY DAN O'BANNON and RONALD SHUSETT SCREENPLAY BY DAN O'BANNON MUSIC JERRY GOLDSMITH

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