

DARK STAR

CARPENTER'S START TREK

It's difficult to imagine the amount of film-making chutzpah necessary to sit down and decide that your first film—your Hollywood calling card—should be a darkly humorous sci-fi parody that pokes a playful finger at Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, one of the most respected space epics of all time. But essentially, John Carpenter's *Dark Star* is an almost slapstick, Bronx-cheer response to Kubrick's celebrated cerebral examination of humanity trying to cope in the vast cosmos of outer space. Though to be fair to the ambitions of Carpenter and cohort Dan O'Bannon, Kubrick himself had certainly taken a job at the solemnity of nuclear cantflagration with *Dr. Strangelove*—a corollary that one can only hope wasn't lost on Kubrick if, at some point, he actually happened to see *Dark Star*.

Dark Star's production history is long and convoluted, but the short version is that while attending USC's film school, Carpenter teamed up with friend O'Bannon in 1970 (two years after 2001's release) to make the ultimate student thesis film. They wrote the script together, O'Bannon played the lavishly erotic Sgt. Pinback and Carpenter

at the end, the intensity of making *Dark Star* broke up Carpenter and O'Bannon's professional and personal relationships, and it's so hard to imagine all the missed opportunities these two great, creative minds would have given us had they continued working together.

If 2001 was derived from the existential darkness of Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dark Star* was spawned from the absurdity of playwright Samuel Beckett. And although this is a John Carpenter film, it is impossible not to see it as a successfully gene-spliced collaboration between Carpenter and O'Bannon, especially in light of the later works of both filmmakers. Perhaps the wide shots of actors reacting in a space for extended periods that one sometimes finds in Carpenter's films was an influence on O'Bannon's directorial debut, *The Return of the Living Dead*, with its meticulously choreographed shots that continue for longer than most audiences realize and reward attentive viewers with expertly crafted jolts and scares.

At the same time, the structure of O'Bannon's script for *Alien* can be seen as having influenced the unrelenting paranoia of Carpenter's *The Thing*, in which a xenomorph is constructed into the midst of one camp from the broken remains of another. The duo may have ended up going their separate ways, but in retrospect, it's easy to see why they got along so well in the first place when it came to thematic material and dramatic structure.

Viewed today, *Dark Star* is just as funny and prescient as ever—and probably closer to the truth of the human experience than the movie that inspired it. Carpenter and O'Bannon's response to the implied sententiousness of Kubrick's masterpiece was to say that you can send humans into space, but we're gonna drag all our crazy bullshit out there with us. Even when we finally make contact with an alien life-form,

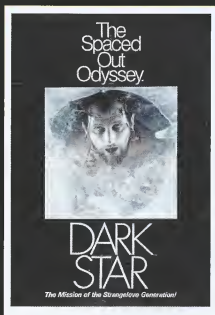
directed.

Both of them also provided the funding and constructed the ingeniously inexpensive but imaginative sets, using oddly shaped Styrofoam packing material and bockit colored marbles to create their claustrophobic mission-control set. Through whatever fortuity surrounds a chormed (if somehow cursed) project like this, special FX duties, also supervised by O'Bannon, fell to a group including such future luminaries as matte painter Jim Danforth, designer Ron Cobb and model builder Greg Jein, giving the movie a visual credibility that for outshines its \$60,000 budget.

When the original filming was done, Carpenter and co. discovered they had a project that ran barely over an hour. With funding from eventual distributor Jack H. Horris, reshoots were undertaken to add scenes, and the 16mm feature was painstakingly blown up to 35mm for theatrical distribution in 1974. In

Dark Star posits that it'll be little more than a semi-intelligent gas-filled ball with clawed feet that's treated like a nuisance pet to be fed and cleaned up after. And if there's anything more brilliantly absurd than a mon archiving phenomenological thinking with a semi-intelligent bomb about to detonate and kill everybody, I ain't seen it. In a modern world filled with drone attacks controlled from thousands of miles away by U.S. soldiers with the equivalent of video-game controllers, *Dark Star*'s "smart bombs" don't seem as far-fetched and comedic as they did nearly 40 years ago.

In the basic premise, we have the template for many Carpenter films to follow, as four men are trapped inside the confined environment of a spaceship and end up fighting amongst them-



selves as much as against a perceived exterior threat (in this case, one of their ship's malfunctioning bombs). Outer space is a cold and unforgiving place, even in a comedy like this. The director's next project, *Assault on Precinct 13*, opens up the playing field a bit for more characters and situations, but like *The Thing*, in the end it boils down to a small group of survivors hunkering down in a single location to fight against an outside force (this time slightly more impressive than a living beach ball) while dealing with their own troubled interactions. As always, there's as much implied threat from what lurks within as the tangibly real dangers trying to break through the barrier without.

Interestingly, one of *Dark Star*'s most famous scenes was part of the reshoots done to expand the movie to feature length. This comedic tour de force involves the alien escaping from its storage compartment and wreck-

Leave it to Southern Californians to work surfing into a space movie.

ing havoc as Pinback attempts to subdue it and return it to captivity. This extended chase is pretty successfully milked for both comedy and suspense, and is a tribute not only to Carpenter's skills as a young filmmaker, but also to O'Bannon's performance, as well as his physical endurance, since performing in the airshoft set—built on an angle, so he was actually lying on his back instead of standing on his feet—was so punishing that he nearly ended up in traction.

This was also the first of many films that Carpenter scored himself (here assisted by the synthesizer-programming skills of Dan

In on ore of serious sci-fi, *Dark Star* explored the lighter side of interstellar travel.

Wyman, his collaborator through *The Fog*), and established the electronic template that would define most of the rest of his composing career. It's a spare but effective soundtrack that works perfectly with the impressive-in-a-shoebox visuals.

Dark Star's explosive climax, brought about by the self-realization of Bomb 20, perfectly foreshadows the many dark endings lying ahead in Carpenter's filmography, while also

providing a perfect example of how a filmmaker can employ recurring images throughout his career that simply could not have been consciously preplanned. After the *Dark Star* explodes, leaving two survivors communicating via their space helmets while being thrown to their deaths in opposite directions, they both comment on how Commander Powell—who was kept alive in a frozen state after a critical accident—is the lucky one who will survive

them all as he hurtles through space in his block of ice—such a block being the care imago that starts all the trouble in *The Thing*, made some eight years later. If you're a Carpenter fan who's never seen this early classic, it is definitely worth seeking out to enjoy on its own merits, and also as a missing link that helps connect the dots between almost everything that came afterward in the director's career.

—Scotter McCrae

DAVID GRANT presents
A JOHN CARPENTER film

From
ALAN DEAN FOSTER
FIRST
2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

THEN
THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE

NOW

DARK STAR^A

bombed out in space
with a spaced out bomb!