

ALIEN

Distributed by 20th Century Fox Film
Company Limited

Bull. No. 19

Category: 'X'

No cuts

Footage: 10,493 feet

Country of origin: UK

Running time: 117 minutes

An astonishing command of film design and technology by British director Ridley Scott and his team has turned this thing-from-outer-space movie into one of the most efficient engines of terror of 1979, and one of the world's box-office phenomena as well. The formula is familiar: a fearsome beast wreaks havoc on a stalwart little band of men and women, decimating them at will like the shark in JAWS, yet indestructible - growing and changing shape as befits a creature from another planet, and producing shock upon shock of delicious horror for those who like their nightmares made manifest. It all begins quietly - if ominously, for those who have been warned - as a cargo ship trundles its way homeward through space, bearing millions of tons of mineral ore and a crew of seven, roused reluctantly from sleep by orders from their mother computer to investigate a signal from some nearby planet. Captain Dallas (Tom Skerritt) and two of his crew disembark and find the wreck of a spacecraft from some alien world, its monstrous crew reduced to skeletons and a pile of enormous leathery eggs. When Kane (John Hurt) risks closer examination, one hatches, disgorging something like a baby squid which clamps itself to his face. Brought back to the ship for aid, he brings the infant monster on board, despite the protests of Third Officer Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), who is reluctant to violate quarantine procedures. She is overruled by Ash (Ian Holm), the scientific officer, who with Dallas operates to remove the monster. Too late, it has already impregnated the body of Kane with a foetus which erupts through his stomach in the middle of

(Continued)

a meal in which the crew are celebrating his apparent recovery. Already armed with teeth, the monster tears through the ship and disappears, leaving the shocked crew to track it down. One by one, they fall victim to the omnivorous creature, which grows and grows, unrecognisable each time it strikes. Ripley, now in command, consults the computer and finds that the ship was deliberately re-routed to pick up this new, indestructible life-form so that it could be brought back to earth by Ash, who is now revealed to be a robot, programmed to survive while the others are merely expendable. In a horrific scene, Ash is clubbed to death by the crew members and bleeds a white, non-human fluid. But the monster can only be despatched if the ship itself is sacrificed. By now the lone survivor, Ripley manages to cut herself loose in the escape shuttle with only the ship's cat for company. Or so she thinks ...

A happy ending enables the nail-biting audience to experience that enormous sigh of relief that signals the extent to which they, too, have come through a testing experience. Vicarious adventure, even against daunting odds, can be profoundly satisfying and it is strange that when such adventure enters the horror mode, British tradition insists that we think in terms of banning it to the young. There are parallels with JAWS, when child-care experts advised us that the film would prove far more frightening to adults than to children. And this was indeed the case. From all over Britain, adults wrote to us to ask how we could make such a terrifying experience available to children; yet we had not a single letter complaining of a child being disturbed by it, although hundreds of thousands of children saw and enjoyed it. Of course, ALIEN lacks the realistic, reassuring setting of JAWS, and it contains some nightmare images, most of them due to the inspired design of Swiss surrealist painter H R Giger. Yet even these images will suggest more to adults with their knowledge of human anatomy than to the young. Certainly, the film seemed to us only borderline 'AA'/'X', with precedent pushing heavily for the more restrictive category. At first, the British distributors were also in two minds, urging us to consider an 'AA' in order to widen the audience for this sort of chilling science-fiction thriller. We replied that if we were to grant an 'AA' to ALIEN, it would be hard ever again to give an 'X' to similar entertainments. Nevertheless, we were about to see the film again with a full examining team and with 'AA' in mind when the distributors withdrew their appeal against the original 'X'. Conversations with the exhibitor had convinced them that 'X' was the more commercial category. After all, how can you advertise the most frightening film of the year at 'AA'! So the question of the extent to which fear may be harmful to the immature remains to be explored. And British precedent remains as well.

A L I E N

Seen with a view to reclassification on 24th March 1980

Passed 'X' on 21st May 1979

I'm very opposed to cutting the film since cuts would obviously have to come in the horror sequences where fast cutting provides the rhythm and the film is too good to spoil. So the question is whether it could be passed 'AA' uncut. This is an interesting possibility for although our general rule is to pass horror films at 'X' no rule is inviolate and should be questioned from time to time. I have no doubt that if we had a 16 category many of the horror films now passed 'X' would be reclassified and that ALIEN would probably be among them. However, I do not want to pass it at 'AA' for the following reasons:

The argument which has been put up for reclassifying is that fear is not age-related and indeed I have heard of two girls who worked on the film not being able to sit through the special screening of the finished print. Fear itself may not be age-related but coping with the after-effects of a fearful experience might be. The experiences a 14-year-old girl and a 34-year-old woman have in watching ALIEN may be similar in intensity but the woman will have had much more experience of what to expect than the girl and will probably have more resources to cope with her feelings after, again because of relevant experiences over a period of time. Secondly, I feel uneasy at passing for 14-year-olds a film which uses sexual imagery in a horror context. The images are not always explicit but run like a dark undercurrent throughout suggesting a powerful, threatening, un-named force. Occasionally the image is explicit as when the leathery egg opens up to reveal glistening pulsating membrane which erupts into the squid-like creature. It was more or less on the strength of a shot like that that INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS was made 'X' and I object to this on the same grounds, i.e. that it presents a perverse view of the reproductive function. I don't want to flash ideas like this to teenagers who might not have come to terms with the normal sexual functions. The early teens are a troublesome time with physical changes making terrific demands on emotional stability and I don't myself want to pass for this age-group a film which might be disturbing in a non-specific way to a significant proportion of them.

