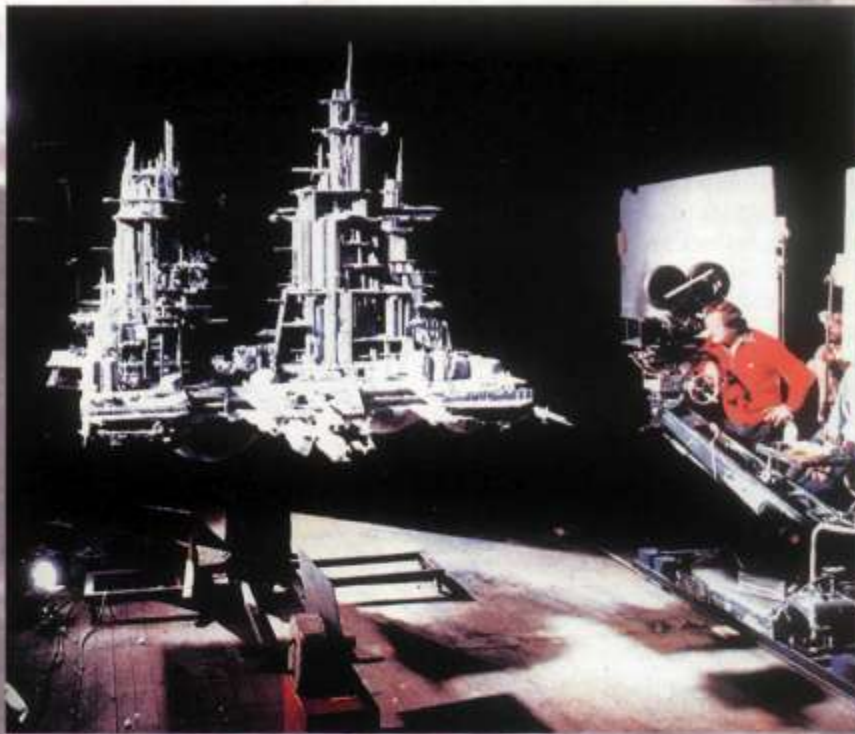
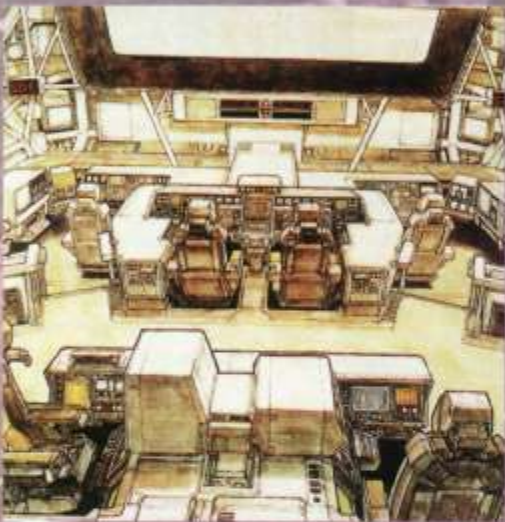




Nostromo bridge (above) and cockpit design (below) by Ron Cobb. Right: *Nostromo* refinery miniature being filmed.



the mother

Creating the gothic high

paul taglianetti

Looking back on *Alien* some twenty years after its original release, one can't help notice (excepting one quite famous dinner scene) how bloodless and tightly paced the film is. Compared to the current crop of celluloid thrillers, the movie is positively stoic. A brilliant fusion of gothic horror and high tech action, *Alien* remains one of the most popular films of the genre...

Released by 20th Century Fox in May, 1979, almost two years exactly after the release of *Star Wars*, *Alien* was greeted with mild indifference by the critics (*Time* reviewer Frank Rich cited the feature as 'depressing to watch' and 'an expensive movie that never soars beyond its cold desire to score the big bucks—it just shovels on the mayhem.') and respectable business at the box office, backed by a cryptic and unusual ad campaign. *Alien* burst upon audiences that summer not unlike the film's titular Creature.

Yet, over two decades after its original release, it is as gripping and exciting as the day it was first released. Many directors, amongst them James Cameron, Paul Verhoeven and Larry and Andy Wachowski, owe a great deal of salutation to Ridley Scott's brilliant atmospheric sci-fi adventure. Like *King Kong* some 50 years earlier, many artists involved with the

film may lay claim to the title of father to the film's shape-shifting Creature, but there is little dispute that the driving creative force behind the project was director Ridley Scott. A graduate of the UK's *Royal College of Art*, Scott eventually became a well-known director of stylish TV commercials. In 1977 he directed *The Duelists* for producer David Putnam, which won the special Jury Prize at the Cannes film festival that year. Scott's directorial style had an acute visual flair that caught the attention of Gordon Carroll and his partners and Scott was brought on to oversee the picture. O'Bannon, while never a serious contender for the director spot, was given a position as visual consultant on the film. His input and suggestion of designs would have a great and lasting input on not only this film but also the others that followed.

Alien takes place almost exclusively aboard the gigantic mineral towing vessel *Nostromo*. While returning home from an ore gathering mission, the ship's on board computer intercepts a transmission emanating from a nearby planetoid. Ultimately the crew lands to investigate and inadvertently bring aboard a lethal *Alien* organism. One by one the crew fall prey to the lethal and elegant entity.

The Writers

The genesis of *Alien* began in the early '70s as the brainchild of writer/producer/effects designer Dan O'Bannon, who had previously worked with John Carpenter creating science fiction cult hit *Dark Star*. O'Bannon was hired to work on a film version of Frank Herbert's *Dune* in 1975 in France for Chilean film director Alejandro Jodorowsky. During pre-production, financing unexpectedly collapsed and O'Bannon found himself back in the States with no job and no future prospects. He moved in with fellow writer (and future *Total Recall* producer) Ronald Shusett. The two decided to team up on a writing project which was an off-shoot of an earlier story that O'Bannon had conceived concerning gremlin creatures who infiltrate a B-17 bomber during a raid over Japan. O'Bannon and Shusett decided to alter the setting to the more



Left: *Nostromo* in flight—shot at Bray Studios, UK.

Right: Giger supervised his vision on set and airbrushed many of *Alien*'s props and costumes.

Below: Giger's airbrushed rendering of the 'derelict' ship.

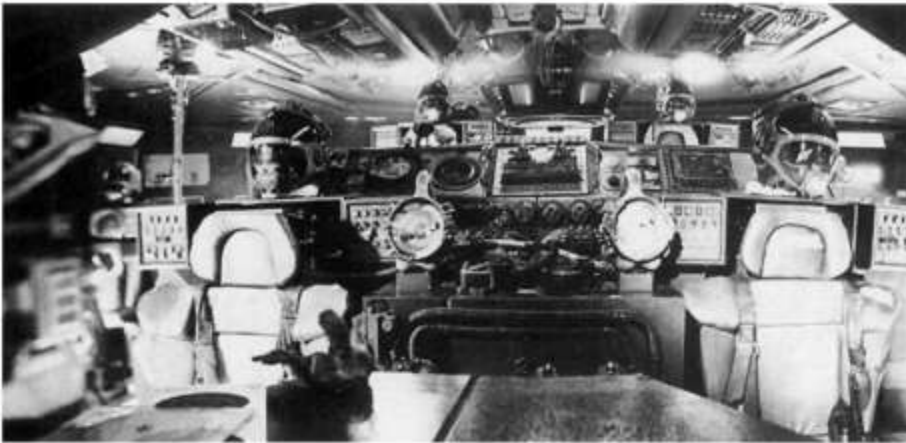
Bottom: the completed 'derelict' miniature and, inset: Ron Cobb's pre-production artwork version of the same.



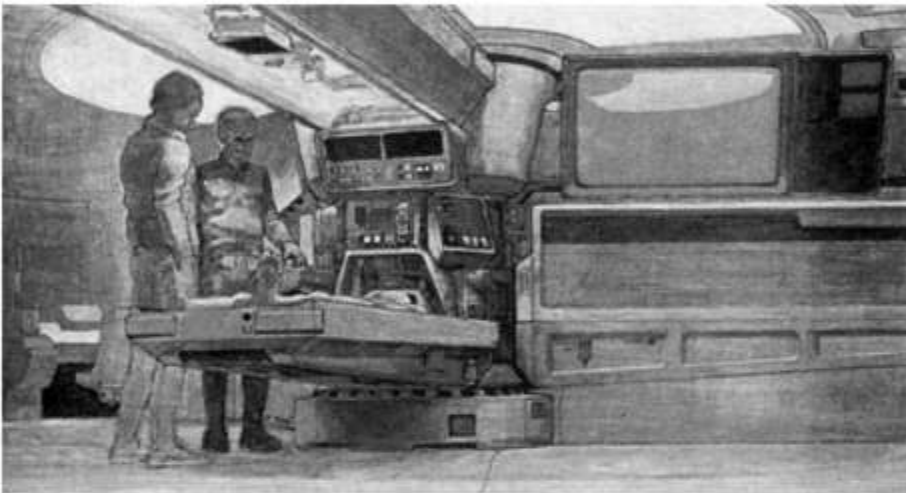
of them all

h tech horror of *Alien*





Nostromo cockpit set and (below) Ron Cobb's med-lab concept art.



Below: EVA suits from Moebius samurai-inspired designs. Right: Ron Cobb face-hugger design.



Below: live action section of 'derelict' ship.



futuristic trappings of modern science fiction. In the wake of the success of **Star Wars**, this seemed like a logical choice. Originally titled **Star Beast**, O'Bannon's final script was eventually optioned by director Walter Hill, best known for his work on **The Warriors** and **The Driver**. He and his partners, screenwriter David Giler and producer Gordon Carroll, liked the general tone of the story but felt the script needed a bit of work.

Ultimately several scenes and scenarios were excised from the O'Bannon script. Notable was the ship's name-change from *Snark* to *Nostromo*. Also eliminated was the pyramid-like structure found by the crew where they first discover the *Alien* egg-pods. It was decided by the producers to condense the script. They would eliminate the sequence and, instead, put the egg chamber in the second tier of the derelict ship.

Hill and Giler worked on several re-writes during the six-month period they had the option on the script. They began to flesh out characters and streamline dialogue. The new script was presented to Fox with Walter Hill set to direct. O'Bannon was given a supplementary job as visual consultant on the movie. It was his first input that would ultimately shape the eventual look of the film. Eventually Hill opted out of directing the film but was still very interested in producing it with his other *Brandywine* partners. The producers then approached Ridley Scott to direct and pre-production began in earnest. The first directive would be to find and assemble a top-notch design team that could visualise the unusual hardware and lifeforms which would populate the movie.

The Designers

Amongst the first designers brought on to the film were noted British sci-fi artist Chris Foss and designer/cartoonist Ron Cobb (who had most recently designed some of **Star Wars'** more striking *Cantina* creatures including *Hammerhead*). O'Bannon had met both artists in France while working on the **Dune** project and he was fairly confident they were up to the task of visualizing *Alien's* high tech look. To alleviate the strain on the budget, Scott elected to storyboard the film himself. An experienced artist and designer, Scott's boards were fundamental in planning the film's elaborate action sequences.

O'Bannon's other significant contribution was suggesting to the producers that Swiss surrealist painter HR Giger design the *Alien*. Giger had spent many months painting conceptual drawings of *sandworms* and some of the architecture for the various planets on the **Dune** project when financing fell through. O'Bannon had seen a collection of Giger's work in the book *Necronomicon*. He eventually brought the book to Ridley Scott's attention to enforce the suggestion that Giger be the one to design the Creature. Scott took one look at the Giger airbrush painting *Necronom IV* and was hooked.



"That's it," he exclaimed and immediately insisted Giger be hired to modify his painting for the film's titular Creature.

One of Scott's own heroes, Jean 'Moebius' Girard, was brought on to create and design costumes and hardware. His most significant and visible contribution was designing the unusual atmosphere suits that closely resemble Japanese samurai armor.

For his production design team, Scott chose Michael Seymour, who had art directed the Vincent Price thriller **Theatre of Blood** and many commercials for Scott himself. Seymour's art department team included Oscar winners Roger Christian and Leslie Dilley who were put in charge of building the various and intricate decks of the *Nostromo* interior as well as the bizarre planetoid the ship lands on. To get the claustrophobic/military look of the interior of the *Nostromo*, Scott screened **Dr Strangelove** for the art team, pointing specially to the B-52 bomber sequences. His desire was to replicate the cramped feel of a military aircraft. Christian and his team spent weeks transforming the set using lengths of pipes and wires and other found miscellaneous bits of hardware. The interiors were painted mostly in whites and olive drab green to emphasize the military look Scott wanted.

Effects supervisors

Several candidates were considered for the

role of visual effects supervisor. The producers first considered Doug Trumbull and John Dykstra, both well known in the field for their work on **Close Encounters** and **Star Wars** respectively. Unfortunately both were busy creating the effects for **Star Trek: the Motion Picture** and were not available. Since the film was being shot exclusively in England at *Shepperton studios*, it was decided someone local would be a better choice. The producers chose Brian Johnson, who was an experienced miniature photographer and designer. Johnson spent several years working for Gerry Anderson and Derek Meddings and was well known as the supervisor and designer of **Space 1999's** *Eagle* transporters. For the physical effects unit, Nick Alder, an expert at mechanical effects, was chosen. Alder was just finishing up work on **The Revenge of the Pink Panther** when he received the offer. In addition to the on set *Alien* effects, Alder would also design and execute the creation of the flame thrower weapons, the cattle prod wands and the atmosphere suits' carbon/methane exhausts.

Face-Hugger and Chest-burster

It was established by O'Bannon and then, later, in Hill's draft, that the Creature would have a unique life cycle. The *Alien's* evolution begins as an egg. From the egg emerges a crab-like parasite (later dubbed the *face-hugger*). Upon attaching itself to the host organism, it lays an embryo in the host stomach. There it gestates until it is ready to emerge, which it does with great force, as a small, undeveloped version of the Creature (dubbed the *chest-burster*). From there the Creature begins to shed its skin as it assumes the general size and shape of the host organism.

To realize the small creature designs the producers commissioned Roger Dicken, an academy award nominee for his effects work on **When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth**. Amongst the most challenging of these was the *chest-burster* phase of the *Alien*. Although only on screen for a few seconds, its appearance would make a lasting impression on viewers everywhere. Dicken began working from a painting by Giger reminiscent in style of Francis Bacon. Dicken attempted to recreate Giger's *chest-burster* design in three dimensions but, after several failed attempts to get a believable movement, he was forced to abandon a literal interpretation of Giger's art and start from scratch. Working with O'Bannon and Scott's input Dicken created a new sculpted version. After some minor modifications (including the removal of two arms) a final version was picked and cast. Ultimately, the final design of the *chest-burster* would be handed over to effects coordinator Nick Alder who would be charged with executing the *burster* effect on set for the now infamous 'last supper'



scene. Alder created a device which would push up a hard plaster version of the *chest-burster* through a fake version of actor John Hurt's chest. The chest section was filled with fake organs then rigged with hoses to transport blood from the chest cavity. After the mechanics were put in place, the fake chest cavity was dressed in John Hurt's T-shirt. Hurt was placed under the table with his head protruding next to the fake cavity. Underneath the table, Dicken operated the *chest-burster* mechanism. Unfortunately the T-shirt proved troublesome as it had to realistically break away on cue. Alder and Johnson developed a chemical mixture that would dissolve the shirt fabric on contact.

Three *Panavision* cameras were set up to film the shot, which is fairly typical for shooting miniatures, explosions and other mechanics that are difficult to re-set quickly. At first the *burster* head was unable to penetrate the T-shirt. The acid solution did not effectively dissolve the shirt so the *burster* could emerge. The shirt was then carefully scored so the fabric would break more easily on subsequent takes.

The *face-hugger* was created almost directly from Giger's painting. A viscous, crab-like creature which springs forth from the *Alien* pods within the derelict ship, the *face-hugger* has a shockingly familiar appearance to actual lifeforms. Dicken sculpted the parasite from

Alien chest burster.



Ron Cobb art for Capt. Dallas' costume.



Full sized Landing leg set.

plasticine then reinforced it with a fiberglass interior. The fingers were basically aluminum armatures, which were covered with latex. For a scene where the now dead *face-hugger* is examined by *Ash* (Ian Holm), Scott and his effects crew used bits of raw oysters and shellfish to simulate the organs of the Creature. The tail was rigged with a thin wire, which was tugged off camera for the shot where the *hugger* tightens its grip on *Kane's* face. *Dallas* (Tom Skerrit) and *Ash* attempt to remove the parasite from *Kane's* face with a laser scalpel. Roger Dicken created a hollow leg replacement which could be injected with the chemical acid mixture created by Johnson and his crew through a small tube. This chemical combination was made with a mixture of acetone and chloroform with other chemicals added in. When dispensed the mixture could easily melt through the styrofoam mock-up of the *Nostromo* med-lab floor.

Charged with building the *Alien* articulated head effect was *Oscar* winner Carlo Rambaldi.



Alien in corridor.

An Italian effects expert who had worked for director Mario Bava, Rambaldi was brought to the 'States in 1975 by Mega-producer Dino DeLaurentis to create the mechanical effects on **King Kong** (for which he received the first of three *Oscars*'). Rambaldi would eventually construct three lightweight *Alien* heads with the articulated second teeth set Two were fully articulated and the third was a lighter version for action scenes when the actor would be in the suit For the section of mouth with the skin that retracts when the mouth is about to spring forward, Rambaldi constructed a membrane out of a clear rubber and used stretched condoms to simulate additional membranes within the mouth. After all the details were complete, Rambaldi added chrome teeth and the finished heads were turned over to Giger for airbrush detailing.

Space Jockey and Derelict

Giger would also have a hand in sculpting and supervising the creation of his images. Chief among his many tasks was supervising the building of the *Alien Space Jockey*, the long dead inhabitant of the derelict craft where the distress signal emanates from. The *Jockey's* design was tackled by Foss and Cobb but ultimately Giger's concept was used in keeping with the look of the *Alien* itself. Giger worked with sculptor Peter Voysey to construct the mammoth shell of the *Jockey* and its chair. They built a wood frame layered with plaster. Tubing and other items were used to detail the structure. Liquid latex was then spread over the outer shell to accent the decayed state of the creature, which was then mounted on a circular platform in the center of the derelict set. Built by production designer Michael Seymour and his crew, this enabled the camera crew to shoot the *Jockey* at different angles, even though only a section of the interior was built.

The derelict was sculpted as a four foot miniature by the late Peter Voysey from Giger's sketches. The concept came from a

painting from *Necronomicon* which caught Scott's fancy. Slight alterations made it more 'crescent shaped'. Giger painted several angles of the ship and a clay and fiberglass sculpture was created. After exiting the *Nostromo* the landing crew finds itself in a ion storm simulated with large pieces of vermiculite blown through the air. The shards proved painful to film crew members who did not have the benefit of spacesuits.

The Egg chamber

The original design for the deadly *Alien* eggs differed slightly from Giger's original concept. The initial painting had the egg opening as a 'vagina-like' slit Eventually this would be altered due to its explicit nature and sculpted by Giger to open at the top with four separate folds. The hero egg was then turned over to effects supervisor Nick Allder and rigged with a hydraulically controlled mechanism to open on cue. The egg chamber was taken directly from a design concept painted by Giger. Since the wall sections were nearly identical in each section, multiple patterns of the chamber sections were cast in plaster and locked together. Over 100 sectional pieces were created to complete the derelict interior. A blue-light scanning laser was secured at the rear of the set and beamed across the base of the chamber. Smoke was introduced into the set, creating the blue mist layer.

For the initial attack of the *hugger* emerging from the egg, Nick Allder and crew rigged the interior of the egg with a small explosive charge and wrapped it in several yards of pig's intestines which uncoiled on cue with the charge. Later, several insert shots would be edited in of the *face-hugger* emerging and intercut with the intestine footage, creating a quick, violent introduction to the parasite. The egg lining was dressed with fresh cow's stomach lining which gave it an organic appearance. A hydraulic mechanism opened the egg on cue.

The Alien

6ft 10 inch tall art student Bolaji Bodejo was hired to don the *Alien* suit for scenes where the Creature was shot full frame and no special mouth articulation needed. Giger designed, sculpted and airbrushed the suit himself. A full body cast was made of the student. From the body mold, Giger sculpted his biomechanical details and airbrushed the surface. It would eventually appear as a three-dimensional version of one of his bizarre paintings. Bodejo would also have to be rigged with a harness for scenes where the Creature lunges down on *Brett*. The Creature, hanging from one of the ship's landing legs, descends upon the crew member, kills him, and carries him up into the ship's upper airlocks. The Creature's second jaw set extends and splits his skull open. The effects crew rigged the actor's hat with tubes which had a blood mixture pumped into it from off stage. Inserts of Rambaldi's cable articulated head were shot for the POV.



Narcissus shuttle miniature half; Ron Cobb *Narcissus* artwork; *Narcissus* escapes the *Nostromo*.

Stanton was also fitted into a special wire rig harness for the additional shot of the Creature carrying him up in the ducts.

Eventually the *Alien* manages to wipe out the entire crew of the *Nostromo* save *Warrant Officer Ripley* (Sigourney Weaver). *Ripley* manages to escape in the shuttlecraft *Narcissus* but, unfortunately, the Creature manages to stow away on board and attacks her. *Ripley* blows it out of the airlock and vaporises it with the ship's exhaust engines.

For the climatic destruction of the *Alien* a full size mock-up of the *Narcissus* shuttlecraft was hung from the ceiling and the *Alien* actor hung from a wire support and released on cue to simulate the gravity thrust of the airlock blast.

Filming the *Nostromo*

While the majority of principal photography was being shot at *Shepperton*, Johnson and his miniature crew set up shop at nearby *Bray studios* to film the many shots needed of the *Nostromo*. The design of the ship had gone through much iteration. Ron Cobb had come closest to capturing the final look. The large, spire-like refinery towers came late in the design phase and added to the main ship structure. It was also decided that the majority

of the *Nostromo* shots would be done in-camera to dispense with expensive, time consuming composites and eliminate the need to use expensive motion control equipment. Brian Johnson was put in charge of photographing the *Nostromo* in post-production at *Bray*. Johnson and his model crew created several versions to satisfy their scale requirements. The smallest was a mere foot long (1/800th scale). There would ultimately be three versions of *Nostromo* miniature, the 12" version used primarily for long shots; a four foot version for the exhaust burn shots and the seven-ton large scale for landing and planetoid shots. The majority of the miniatures would be shot quite simply with a camera moving on a dolly track shooting at a low frame per second camera rate. This allowed the camera operators to hold focus while staying extremely close to the miniatures without giving away the scale. During the model building phase, Ron Cobb's design drawings were used as reference for the visual effects model crew to work with. The models were constructed primarily of wood and plastic. For detailing the model builders used dozens of plastic model kits which would provide minute modular pieces for the outer hull.

Title design

Among *Alien*'s other interesting design refinements were the opening titles. The producers contacted title and graphic designers Richard Greenberg, who created the startling slitscreen titles for *Superman: The Movie*. For the opening Scott wanted titles reminiscent of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Greenberg's minimalist title design originally for *Alien*'s mysterious teaser trailer was so successful Scott decided to utilise the type formation for the opening credit sequence as well as the movie posters.

Aftermath

Alien was a tremendous hit that launched the careers of nearly all performers and technicians involved. O'Bannon continued his career as a successful screenwriter, sharing writing credits on such films as *Total Recall*, *Blue Thunder*, *Dead and Buried* and *Screamers*. He would ultimately realize his dream of directing in 1985 when he made the horror spoof *Return of The Living Dead*. Ridley Scott continues to be one of the most gifted visualists of modern Cinema. He followed *Alien* with the even more daring *Blade Runner* which has since become a modern classic of science fiction cinema. His new film *Gladiator* opens this summer.

Art Director Roger Christian would later go on to become a director himself. Last year he directed second unit on *Episode One/The Phantom Menace* and is currently directing the film adaptation of *Battlefield Earth*. Nick Alder continues to be one of England's most talented and busy effects experts. Most recently he contributed effects work for Luc

Besson's the *Fifth Element*.

The success of *Alien* brought new attention to the work of H R Giger and his designs were often copied in fantasy films that followed, among them *Galaxy of Terror*, *Scared to Death*, *Forbidden World*, and *Parasite*. His work has been collected in over two dozen books and he has gone on to create new designs for the films *Poltergeist II*, *Species*, *Future Kill* and *Killer Condom*.

For their work in creating the effects Johnson, Alder, Rambaldi, Giger and Ayling received the *Academy Award*TM for best visual effects in 1980. The film was



The *Alien* menaces *Ripley* at the film's climax.

also nominated for Art Direction, citing the work of Michael Seymour, Roger Christian and Les Dille.

Alien has had a significant and lasting effect on the visual history of science fiction and horror films that have followed it. It has inspired three sequels and numerous imitators, but no equals. Although many critics and film historians analyzed it as nothing more than a glossy re-tread of '50s sci-fi horror themes, it has a uniqueness and freshness of its own and will remain a classic of the genre. A tough act to follow, as director James Cameron would soon discover...

Special thanks to Bob Skotak and Brian Anthony for their help with the research of this article.