

## Clash of Covenant

Opinion remains divided on the sixth addition to the Alien universe

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*Alien: Covenant* has proven itself to be one of the most polarising pictures of 2017 so far – too bad it came out slightly too late to be featured in our last [top 5](#). Going back to the slasher horror roots of the original *Alien*, many have decried the film for trying to give a backstory to a franchise which works so well without one. On the other hand, there are those who appreciate the expansion of what is, undeniably, the most successful sci-fi horror series of all time. Today, two of the *Nouse* Film & TV team go head to head to discuss whether Ridley Scott's *Alien: Covenant* is a worthwhile movie.



Image: 20th Century Fox

### **YES (Michael Maitland-Jones) -**

To say that *Alien: Covenant* arrived with baggage attached is something of an understatement. Not only having to serve as a satisfying sequel to 2012's most polarising film: *Prometheus*, a prequel to the seminal 1979 classic but also to prove that Scott still has a grasp on the Alien universe and can capably deliver an Alien film that works for a modern audience; it's fair to say that the stakes were high. The fact that *Alien: Covenant* is for the most part able to overcome these obstacles and deliver a highly entertaining, intellectually buzzing sci-fi thriller therefore comes as a joyous surprise. More of a twisted 'little shop of horrors' inflected creature feature than a full on horror film; this is the Alien film we needed, although maybe not the one we expected.

Despite the film being overwhelmingly marketed as a gore-splattered B-movie, there are some genuinely interesting ideas being played with here in a way that brings the film closer thematically to the likes of

*Blade Runner*; thoughts on creation, consciousness and evolution are all handled in a way that is fortunately much less ham-fisted than in *Prometheus*, thanks in large part to an engaging, if a little grandiose, script by *Penny Dreadful's* John Logan. Those seeking the less-dialogue heavy, maximum scare structure of *Alien* may be left wanting here but it's perhaps for the best that *Covenant* decides to tread its own, mostly divergent, path; the shadow of the original *Alien* looms large over this but it is never allowed to completely derail the new story being told. That being said there is body horror that rivals maybe even that of the original, and as the marketing of the film has heavily pointed out, we do indeed get to see the beast itself in action, albeit for a fairly small portion of the film.

The characters, although too numerous, are significantly more believable than most seen in a genre film of this kind; their grief and terror frequently feels genuine, with Katherine Waterston and Billy Crudup being particular highlights among a slightly forgettable crew. It's Fassbender however who dominates, wisely given the most screen time he is an undeniable joy to watch in almost every scene; alternating between the dulcet tones of the android Walter and his considerably more flamboyant counterpart David, he is frequently astonishing. The one character that perhaps feels the most misplaced is bizarrely the titular Xenomorph itself; Scott revealed that its presence was a late addition to the script, triggered mainly by fan demand and it does feel shoe-horned in at times. Although its genesis is creepily well-realized, its appearance is somewhat diluted by over-exposure; in your face and rendered in fairly obvious CGI, the alien we see here is a far cry from the shadowy, corridor stalking nightmare that characterized the original.

Despite this slight miss-step, Scott remains as competent behind the camera as most directors half his age and continues to utilize his own brand of technically masterful filmmaking. The cinematography is eerily beautiful on the woodland landscapes of the strange new world the colonists land on and claustrophobically intense in the more intimate settings; Jed Kurzel's excellent score additionally giving an unsettling ambience to these settings. The editing is likewise top-notch and keeps the film going at a pace that although frequently break-neck, allows for the all-important character moments that give this film substance. The practical effects and production design of the film are perhaps what set it apart from other similar sci-fi that has dominated in recent years; the look of the film is strangely closer to a gothic horror than a futuristic space epic and its' a ballsy stylistic choice that pays off.

*Alien: Covenant* does not achieve the near-perfection of the first two films in the franchise and suffers from an overabundance of characters, along with a strange use of an iconic creature; however there's much more to like here than you may have expected. There are character moments that are genuinely satisfying to witness, filmmaking that is almost uniformly top-notch, as well as multiple dramatic turns that will catch all but the most attentive audience member off-guard. If you're expecting a full re-tread of the original horror masterpiece as the marketing would have you believe then you'll be disappointed; however if you're looking for a stranger, more brain-teasing film with some real surprises then you'll be resoundingly satisfied.



Image: 20th Century Fox

### **NO (Matthew Chesters) -**

Ridley Scott appears to have wanted *Alien Covenant* to be two things at once: a continuation of David's story in *Prometheus*, and a remake of the original *Alien*. He seems infinitely more interested in the former, and so Michael Fassbender's laconic take on the power-mad android is the centre of gravity around which most of the film orbits, bookended by a re-tread of the events of the first *Alien*, but with a different crew, and with much more bloodthirsty body-horror.

To be blunt, this re-treading is not good. The Xenomorph hunt feels over familiar, the crew (with one or two exceptions) are forgettable, and as good as Katherine Waterson is as Daniels, she represents yet another attempt to recreate Ripley - an unwise decision, given how totally Sigourney Weaver made that role her own.

By contrast, the continuation of David's story is exceptional. It's clearly the part of the film which Scott is most interested in, as every scene which doesn't feature David feels as though the director is asleep at the wheel. Fassbender's performance is, of course, magnificent. David is a well written character, but the performance elevates the character to the realms of sci-fi gold. The effete poise and maniacal purpose which pervade his every action are a joy to watch every time he's on screen. Through David, the film presents a uniquely sci-fi inversion of the Frankenstein's monster story, and explores the relationship between creator and created, as well as the relationship between madness and the search for beauty and perfection.

The incredibly frustrating part of all this is that it takes place in an *Alien* movie. The exploration of these themes is framed as an origin story for the Xenomorph, and flesh out its connection to Weyland-Yutani, bridging the gap between *Alien* and *Prometheus*. This is an incredibly misguided idea. Many have complained, rightly, that *Covenant's* attempts to explain more of the mythos just litters it with plot holes and inconsistencies. This is very true, but *Covenant's* more egregious crime is the damage it does to the integrity of the original *Alien*. In the original, the Xenomorph didn't need explanation. In fact, it was designed to resist explanation. The design of the creature, and of the alien ship and environments in the 1979 film, were made to be completely inscrutable. H. R. Giger's artwork genuinely looks as though it was not designed by human hands, and the psychosexual nature of the creature's design is horrific in its obscurity. The *Alien* was a parasite which infested the crew of the *Nostromo*, and the horror came from the fact that there was no more to comprehend than that - there is a big thing on the ship and I don't understand what it is and it's trying to eat me.

This, in part, is why the 'Alien' parts of *Alien: Covenant* don't work. By being given an explanation, and thereby having a core element of what made it a terrifying horror antagonist, the *Alien* is diminished. It stops being the gold standard for sci-fi horror monsters, and ends up being more of an attack dog. Sadly, the same goes for the 1979 movie. It has retroactively been made worse by *Covenant*. As a film, it is

weakened now that we know that behind all of that obscurity surrounding the Alien, there is actually an effete British supervillain pulling the strings behind the scenes.

The David story in *Covenant* is excellent, but what is unforgivable is that it comes at the expense of the Alien franchise as a whole. If they had the bravery to make it its own sci-fi movie, divorced from the franchise, *Covenant* could really have been something special. As it stands, Scott has cannibalised one of his greatest sci-fi films to make it, and that seems to me like too high a cost.



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