

# The Abyss ★★★

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**Year of Release:** 1989

Review by Randy Parker

**Country:** USA

**Verdict:** See It

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Mix together *2001*, *Close Encounters*, *Aliens*, and *The Poseidon Adventure* and you have *The Abyss*, director James Cameron's incredibly ambitious underwater adventure. Cameron has gone for broke in his attempt to chart new cinematic territory—to boldly go where no director has gone before. He has created a sci-fi love story of epic proportions, one that is surprisingly provocative. Despite flaws in the film's execution, one has to be impressed by the scope and scale of Cameron's vision.

In one of the most grueling shoots in film history, *The Abyss* was filmed 30 feet underwater in a 7.5 million gallon concrete tank. The movie is set aboard Deepcore, a submersible, commercial oil rig which is commandeered by the Navy to investigate a crashed nuclear submarine. The Navy sends a team of SEAL (Sea, Air, and Land) divers down to the rig to lead its civilian crew on a search expedition.

In the lead roles, Ed Harris and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio hold their own against the hardware and special effects—playing, respectively, Bud Brigman, the foreman in charge of Deepcore's crew, and his estranged wife, Lindsey, a self-described “cast-iron bitch” who designed the revolutionary oil rig. The two characters rekindle their love while all hell is breaking loose on the ocean floor; they find themselves contending with a hurricane, some mysterious alien sea creatures, and a Navy officer who is suffering from water pressure-induced psychosis.

Technically, *The Abyss* is dazzling—a cinematic knockout. The movie's budget is rumored to have exceeded \$50 million, and it's a good bet that every penny is on the screen. Perhaps most startling and awe-inspiring is the sound; *The Abyss* offers the most dramatic utilization of Dolby stereo surround I've ever heard. The movie is a triumph of sound editing, especially when blasted through a state of the art THX sound system. Clinking chains, whirring motors, and gasping breaths engulf the audience from every direction.

Visually, *The Abyss* is no less stunning. Cameron's direction—as well as the movie's cinematography, underwater sets, and special effects—is spectacular. One particularly gripping moment comes when Cameron shoots from inside a diver's helmet; the tension and claustrophobia are almost unbearable. *The Abyss* passes its most important test: it creates the illusion that the action is actually

unfolding half a mile beneath the ocean's surface. Cameron's film is beautifully and lovingly crafted and so overwhelmingly massive that it leaves you in a state of sensory overload.

Cameron also wrote *The Abyss*, but unfortunately his spiritual story of the unknown is full of leaks. First, the movie strains its credibility at every twist and turn to the point where it sometimes unintentionally draws laughs. The characters seem to rely more on luck than on their own resources to get themselves out of sticky situations. For example, a crew member awakens from a coma at just the right moment to save his comrades. Second, except for the two leads, the members of the rescue team are forgettable, stock characters. When three crew members drown early in the film, their deaths have no emotional impact whatsoever. None of the supporting actors leaves a lasting impression, except for Michael Biehn (*Terminator*, *Aliens*) as the deranged SEAL officer; Biehn deserves credit for trying to flesh out his cardboard character. Third, the movie takes itself so seriously that it often borders on pretentious melodrama.

For the above reasons, *The Abyss* is often difficult to swallow at face value, and you never totally buy the situation. Unlike *The Terminator* and *Aliens*, Cameron's two previous films, *The Abyss* fails to completely absorb you into its fantasy world. The movie reached theaters over a month behind schedule because of production and special effects delays, which perhaps explains its unfinished feel. It almost seems as if Cameron hurried his final cut, in which case the holes and loose-ends may be rooted in the editing room rather than in the screenplay.

At two hours and twenty minutes, *The Abyss* is about half an hour too long. Cameron spends too much time setting up the conflict, and he also tries to cram too many themes into the film. The alien subplot, while providing an excuse for some nifty special effects, is ultimately no more than a recycled Hollywood cliché. The movie also superficially introduces, and then fails to explore, the political undercurrents surrounding the issue of nuclear weapons (the sunken sub houses warheads with five times the power of Hiroshima). *The Abyss* tries to tread through so much water that everything seems half-baked, except for the touching love story between Bud and Lindsey.

In Cameron's capable hands, however, the cup

is definitely half-full rather than half-empty. Once all the plot strands are in place, the movie kicks into high gear and offers the intense, riveting action that is Cameron's forte. One of the most nerve-wracking scenes has Bud and Lindsey stranded in a flooding capsule with only one oxygen suit between them in which to swim back to the oil rig. Panic sets in as they (and we) realize that only one of them can escape alive. While *The Abyss* doesn't match the breakneck pace of *Aliens* or the frightening suspense of *The Terminator*, it contains enough nail-biting tension to leave you without finger nails.

*The Abyss* undoubtedly will spark heated debates between its fans and its foes, like two other recent big-budget extravaganzas with lofty aspirations: *Batman* and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. Visually, all three films are astonishing. They differ considerably, however, in the strength of their scripts. In *Batman*, director Tim Burton complements the film's dramatic film noir look with a story that, while not fully developed, is absorbing and compelling. *Baron Munchausen*, on the other hand, is all flash and no substance; it leaves

you altogether indifferent to the characters and plot. *The Abyss*, by comparison, falls somewhere in between these two extremes. The blossoming love between Bud and Lindsey and their desperate battle for survival on the ocean floor provide enough human drama to make *The Abyss* more than just a technical achievement.

After all is said and done, *The Abyss* is not Cameron's best work. The film really doesn't break much new ground. Its mystical feeling is too reminiscent of *2001*, and its climax makes me wonder if *The Abyss* should have been called "Close Encounters of the Suboceanic Kind." Without the spiritual and extraterrestrial nonsense, *The Abyss* would have worked splendidly as a straightforward survival thriller. Even so, it remains a complex, challenging must-see for adventure fans, one that will leave your ears ringing, your heart pumping, and your head spinning.

**Note:** Virtually all of the shortcomings mentioned above were excised in the Cameron's director's cut, *The Abyss (Special Edition)*, released in 1993.

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